

Smooth Living

Beyond the Life of a Vagabond

by

Christopher 'Vago' Damitio

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VAGO DAMITIO

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my daughter, Sophia Damitio. The road has been rough indeed at times, but when I look at your beautiful tiny face, I'd be willing to tread roads a thousand times rougher just to hear you laugh.



VAGO DAMITIO

Table of Contents

DEDICATION.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	v
Introduction.....	vii
Advice to Aspiring Vagabonds.....	10
The End of the Life Aloha.....	12
The Twenty Book Tour.....	15
Love in the Barangay – The Philippines.....	17
Becoming Buddhist.....	22
Recreating Myself.....	25
Walking Around Oahu.....	27
Working the System – Student Life.....	39
Surfing Couches in Hawaii	43
Amtrak Across the USA.....	45
Escaping to Europe.....	57
Losing the Thread.....	59
The Lure of the Oriental – The Maghreb.....	62
From the Interzone to Engagement.....	64
Escaping to Europe Again – My Last Hurrah.....	67
Canadian Customs and Discourtesy.....	71
Crossing Canada with \$4.....	75

My Father the Nit-Picker.....	83
Returning to Morocco.....	86
Resistance is Futile – Becoming a Muslim	88
The Horror of International Marriage.....	91
Berber Nomad Wedding in the Sahara.....	95
Turkey at Last.....	98
Vagabond Train.....	105
Pernik -A Brisk Winter Walk.....	108
The Serbian.....	110
Skull Towers and Concentration Camp Victims.....	114
Dancing Midgets and The Russian Prostitute Who Loved Me...117	117
Returning to Asia – Almost Around the World.....	122
Underground Seoul.....	126
South Korea's East Coast.....	128
Korean Bath Houses - Jjimjilbangs.....	131
Hitching to the DMZ.....	133
Family Day at the Penis Park.....	136
Korean Sex Motels -aka Love Motels.....	138
I Love You Mummy!.....	140
Whore Watching in Kuala Lumpur.....	142
Sick in Jakarta – Indonesia Revisited.....	145

VAGO DAMITIO

Being Fruitful and Multiplying.....	148
Thanksgiving in Paris.....	151
Five-Star Turkey.....	155
Blogville.....	159
Not So Smooth After All.....	162
The Reason of the Road.....	165
Worry Free Travel.....	169
From Zero-Star to Five-Star – Finding a Place to Stay.....	172
24 Miscellaneous Accommodation Tips	178
4 Reasons to Stay in Hostels.....	180
25 Reasons Not to Stay in Hostels.....	181
Finding the Right Place to Stay.....	184
Street Foodie and Other Feasts.....	186
16 Miscellaneous Food Tips.....	189
Travel Money: Finding Cash on the Road and For the Road....	190
6 International Cash Tips.....	195
30 Tips for Travel Security.....	196
Means of Travel.....	198
What's in your luggage?.....	204
Bag Storage on the Road.....	207
Traveling with a Baby.....	208

Quick Guide to Finding Free Internet.....	210
The People of the Road.....	211
The Art of Conversation with Grumpy Expats.....	214
32 Miscellaneous Tips for Smooth Living	217
How NOT to Enjoy Smooth Living	221
Appendix :	225
Notes from the Road to Smooth Living.....	225
Helpful Travel Websites and Online Resources.....	230
ABOUT THE AUTHOR.....	231

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VAGO DAMITIO

INTRODUCTION

There was a time I believed I knew everything . Life was never so hard as that time. Told I had the makings of an officer and a gentleman and offered the chance to attend the Defense Language Institute and Officer Candidate School, instead, I chose to drink myself into oblivion and act like a class A dumb ass for four years.

Offered the chance to re-enlist for a substantial bonus based on the glowing praise of my superiors (despite my idiotic foibles), I chose to destroy my credit rating and drive myself into bankruptcy without giving myself anything to show for it.

Bumbling into a career in radio, I chose to turn down a steady job and focus on becoming an anarchist. Lucking into a career in technology during the dot-com boom, I chose to leave any career advances I might have made and burn my bridges behind me with a 'fuck you' letter sent to my bosses (and the rest of the company – in case the bosses didn't see it. You gotta love email for bridge burning!)

Somehow, instead of becoming a skid row bum in Seattle, I managed to travel to Asia with no money, explore North America, and move to Hawaii. During that time, it's fair to say I considered myself the smartest guy in the room. The truth is, I was an exceptionally lucky dumb-ass.

It's no wonder I titled my first book "*Rough Living.*" The thing I didn't realize was the person making my life rough was me. I was a self made, downwardly mobile loser who somehow kept floating despite pulling some boneheaded moves.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the end of my idiocy. Over the past decade, I've continued to make idiotic moves and although you

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND
might think since I'm writing about it, I've learned my lesson, I haven't. In ten years, I'm sure I'll look back at now and realize I'm *almost* as big an idiot as I was in 2003 when *Rough Living: Tips and Tales of a Vagabond* went into print.

I hope "*almost*" will be there. It's hard to say but I'm sure hindsight will reveal the truth. My life today is far better than it was in 2001 when I thought I was leaving the USA for good as I stepped on a flight to China. I did have some lessons to share in that first book. Good lessons. Things that have changed people's lives.

Here's the first paragraph from that now decade old introduction:

What the hell is this rough living? Rough living is making due without. Without whatever you might need or want at any given moment. Without food, without money, without shelter, without whatever it is you want immediately at hand. Rough living is spending your last dollar without knowing where the next one will come from. Rough living is also about the rewards that come from making it anyway.

The thing I didn't write or know was the rough living I was doing was a choice. A masochistic choice. A dangerous choice. A limiting choice.

I created my own worst enemy. The reasons aren't so essential to know as the fact that ten years later, I recognize him. That enemy (me) wanted (and still wants) to kill me. He wants me to fail. He wants me to suffer. The worst part was realizing that asshole who was punishing me (*the man*, whom I kept blaming) was me.

Seeing my own self-destructive nature wasn't the moment of change. The moment of change came later when I realized that buried deep within me was a hero. The person my self destruction was aimed at was me. The me that wanted me to succeed. The me that desired me to be happy. The me that wanted to live up to the potential I have been blessed with. The me that I almost succeeded in killing through mental, physical, emotional, and financial suicide.

That me - doesn't want me to suffer. The hardest part of transformation is finding a way to empower the positive self. It is an age old dilemma.

If the positive self attacks the negative self, the attacker turns to the dark side. If the positive self stops resisting, it will be snuffed out. At that

VAGO DAMITIO

point, the inner Jedi is gone. Suicide. The real dilemma is how to empower the positive. How to empower me – the positive me. The real me.

Unfortunately, it wasn't as simple as looking in a mirror and saying 'use the force'. It has been, and continues to be, a process.

There is a simple key to the process. A key I was told about again and again. A key I struggled to find, found, picked up, and lost. It happened over and over and over. What was it?

Love.

Not romantic, brotherly, or philosophical love. Not physical or emotional love. Instead, a feeling, a suggestion, a vision, and an observation. The love that saved me was the love of life. The French call it *joie de vivre*. The Italians call it *amore per la vita*. Every culture has a phrase that describes it, but perhaps the best of them is the French phrase – that certain *je ne sais quoi*. Yes, I was saved by the 'I don't know what.'

It is the feeling you get when you hear the wind gently blowing through trees. Watching gentle ripples on the water. Hearing a child's laughter. Seeing an old friend. Watching someone doing something that consumes them. Doing something you are passionate about. This is the key to Smooth Living; this is the key to empowering your positive self. This is the way I've begun to escape from my own awful creature. I am still escaping, but the life I live now is far smoother than the one I led a decade ago. Don't get me wrong, there are still rough spots, but they are now the minority of experiences I deal with. I am firmly on the road to Smooth Living.

I hope you enjoy this book. I hope this introduction hasn't scared you off. This is not a self-help book. This is a book of tips, experience, and so much more that has helped me enjoy a life of smooth living on the road. It is also some of the many tales, foibles and follies I've experienced along the way to help express that.

For me, the key to discovering that joy of life was to discover travel. Finding a way to see the world, meet the people of the world, and experience the joy of others.. Travel allowed me to escape my own patterns and preconceptions. Philosophically, I'm not sure I can share much beyond what I've already told you in this introduction, but in terms of practical advice about how to travel - I have a lot to offer.

Time to hit the road, Jack. Make sure you come back.

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

ADVICE TO ASPIRING VAGABONDS

I've decided to do the opposite of what I did in *Rough Living: Tips and Tales of a Vagabond*. In Smooth Living, I'm going to start with the stories and then later I'll provide the tips. If you don't like that approach, you can skip to where the tips begin, read that section, and then come back and read this first section. Either way, read this letter first. To begin, I'd like to share my response to a 16-year-old, aspiring world traveler who emailed me recently. He asked me for advice about how to live his life and 'escape from the cave'.

Dear Linus,

It's hard to say for sure, because I don't know you and your situation, but this is the advice I wish someone had given me. Understand it's all a rip off. The world is a rip off trying to steal your time. We all have a limited amount of time. We all die. No doubt about that. Every human who has ever lived has died within a hundred or so years. It's for sure. Never forget it. Your time is limited.

I wasted so much time with booze and drugs. Fun at times, but, I wish I had most of that time back. I could have been camping, hitching, or writing! I could have been fucking! Instead I was wasting my time and my money. I could have been staring at clouds!

College was great. I waited until I was in my 30s, but it would have been interesting to do it before. Make sure you can get someone else to pay for it, otherwise just use the free courses on line and libraries. You can email professors for their course syllabus without taking a course. But, going to college was fun. The ideas, the experiences...and the girls. Go to college. Do yourself a favor and get scholarships though. It's worth it to put extra hours towards studying in order to get the grades in

VAGO DAMITIO

high school, since they can enable you to get a free ride at university. If not, focus on any scholarship you can get. Loans are a hidden trap. I don't know if I will ever pay mine back.

Take short trips whenever you can. Weekend hitch trips fill the gap between summer months on the road. Go everywhere even if it is ten miles away. Don't miss the Grand Canyon because you live in Arizona, know what I mean? The close things are often better than the far ones.

Take time to write. Start a blog. Learn to do basic coding. Be creative. Make art. Build cool things. Don't listen to criticism unless it's productive and constructive. Be awesome. Humans are maker-monkeys.

Don't undervalue your time. Ask for more money and work harder. Make it clear to employers you are not ordinary. Do a kick ass job every time. Ask for twice as much and then give them three times more.

Don't waste your money. Booze and drugs are expensive. Cars are expensive. Fancy clothes are expensive. Worthless women are expensive. Spend your money on the things that matter and save the rest for your adventures. Money comes from spending your time. Spend it wisely.

Women (or men). Write down exactly what you want. It's then you will find her (or him). I mean exactly. Height, hair, hobbies, qualities. She (or he) is there. Don't settle. Demand your dream come to you. She (or he) will.

Some people refuse to compromise and won't lose an argument. Recognize them and don't waste your time. Just say, I see what you are saying and move on. Walk away. Write that person out of your life. They're not worth spending time on.

These are the five qualities of a good friend. You can trust them with money. They won't judge you. You can trust them with your woman (or man). You can trust them with a secret . They are there when you need them.

Don't waste your time on anyone who doesn't have these qualities. When you find a good friend, be the above. Give more than you get. That is the secret to great friendships and great love. Be stingy about who you love.

Write your own ten commandments. Know your morals and refuse to budge.

*I hope your life is awesome,
~Vago*

That's what I can teach you about Smooth Living until we travel together. Let's move on to my own tales of the smooth life. As you'll see – it's not always smooth.

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

THE END OF THE LIFE ALOHA

In 2003, I had a fling with a flight attendant which I mistook for true love. In an ill-fated attempt to demonstrate my devotion, I left a rather charmed life on the island of Kauai. I was working as a kayak guide, living in a VW bus twenty feet from the shoreline, and earning a good living. I left that to follow her to her hometown of Portland, Oregon, from whence I had departed from the mainland back in 2001. You may have seen the VW and where I lived on the cover of Rough Living: Tips and Tales of a Vagabond.

Let me emphasize this – it was a terrible idea to leave Hawaii. She already had a boyfriend and didn't want anything to do with me which I mistook for her thinking I wasn't good enough for more than a fling. In an effort to impress her, I took a job as a stockbroker in Portland, took all the necessary tests and certification courses, and began wearing a suit to work each morning. Every night, I listened to Hawaiian music, dreamed about being back on Kauai, and worked on the book I'd been writing since I 'retired' from the corporate world. The book was about how to enjoy life without being a wage slave. Ironically, at 4 am each morning, I trudged to my new corporate office. Just to be clear, I was aware of my hypocrisy and it hurt – but I truly believed I was laboring for love.

She agreed to have lunch with me after I'd become a stock broker. It went well but after that I'd drunk dialed her and she refused to have anything else to do with me. Her reasons were she had a boyfriend and I was obviously delusional because I'd mistaken a fling for true love. My overblown sense of enacting a true love romantic drama came across as obsessive, unhinged, and dangerous.

My story: I'd found the woman I didn't want to live without so I'd left behind paradise, friends, and a damn fine life to prove I was good enough for marriage. I was suffering through a city I didn't want to be in and a career I didn't want to be in. All for her.

VAGO DAMITIO

Her story: Wow, this miserable psycho followed me all the way from Hawaii and keeps telling me he can't live without me. I already told him I have a boyfriend and it was just a fling. Why does he call me every time he's drunk and ask why I'm doing this to him? Scary!

I was tortured and confused on many levels. I'm certain that showed.

The positive thing about my time in Portland's rain was I managed to put together Rough Living: Tips and Tales of a Vagabond and a publisher agreed to print it and make me an author.

Rough Living was rejected by the first thirty-eight agents and publishers I sent it to (yes, I kept count.) They all said the same thing - "We love the way you write, but you've written a book that appeals to people who don't have any money. Who is going to buy it?"

This was 2003. The ebook was brand new and publishing hadn't yet figured out a business model that included them. One company that had an idea was Booklocker (<http://www.booklocker.com>) It was a company formed when a couple of literary agents realized that with virtually no overhead, they could sign up aspiring authors and publish their books. Using a new technology called print-on-demand, they provided nothing except routine guidance. They let the author do all the editing and design or they charged them to do the process. If the book succeeded, their publishing house reaped the rewards and if it didn't, no harm done. In fact, it was a nice service for authors because it didn't have the stigma of 'vanity' publishing where authors forked out cash to have their books printed.

As I said, the cover of Rough Living was the VW bus I had left behind in Hawaii. I have no idea what happened to it after I left. I left the paperwork in the glove-box signed over to whomever wanted it. When I later asked, my friends told me it had been moved to someone's farm and was being used for storage. That's all I know.

Booklocker added a table of contents and I was published. The book was immediately successful. At the time, there was a neo-nomadic movement happening and people were moving into campers, learning to travel on the cheap, and using the internet to learn how to do it. My book found its way to these people. It also landed in the hands of VW enthusiasts who liked the cover. Booklocker was selling the hard copy and an ebook in PDF form. There was no protection on the PDF and it was uploaded to websites and emailed from who wanted to share the book with their friends for free. I made a few hundred dollars and was quite happy with it until I went to a VW show in Seattle and found out that nearly everyone there had been emailed a free copy. I freaked out. I didn't know enough to know this was great publicity and I should use it.

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

All I saw was I'd written a successful book and wasn't making any money from it. I was pissed. I pulled the book from Booklocker as soon as I could and self-published it on Lulu.com.

The book was getting some great reviews but had also become the target of some trolls on the message boards. We didn't all understand the internet back then and I didn't understand that concept of what trolls were (people who get off on putting strangers down while safely hidden behind an online alias) – I was incredibly hurt by it. I didn't understand where the hatred they had for me and my book was coming from. No one had ever attacked me that way before.

Life was going my way though. My father agreed to purchase one-hundred copies and distribute them to influential friends and golfing buddies. He seemed sure he could help make it a best seller. I dedicated the book to him and I sent him the first copy. I never heard back from him. Finally, I called and his wife answered – she sounded reserved. I asked to speak to him and she said he wasn't feeling well. I insisted and she put him on. He was abrupt.

"You've destroyed our name and brought shame on everyone with the name Damitio," he told me. "There are experiences in this life you aren't supposed to share."

I don't remember the rest of the conversation but essentially he told me he was ashamed to be my father and he demanded I unpublish and apologize. I refused. It was him or the book. I picked the book. I didn't talk to him again for years.

Between the flight attendant rejecting me, the hateful words of the trolls, my father forsaking me, and the suit and tie job I felt like a hypocrite going to every day, life was anything but smooth. In fact, life had never been so rough. The only good thing was seeing my book. I focused on that and did the only self-empowering thing I could do.

I quit my job, paid my debts, and took my mainland VW bus on a book tour with as many copies of my books as I could afford to buy after settling my debts. I could afford exactly twenty copies. I needed to get enough money to go back to my life of kayaking and eating mangoes in Hawaii. Somehow. I called it "The Twenty Book Tour."

VAGO DAMITIO

THE TWENTY BOOK TOUR

I went straight to Bellingham, Washington. In the past, I'd achieved some success in Bellingham as a writer for local papers, a DJ, a magazine publisher, and an oddball kook. Bellingham is filled with oddball kooks. Oddball kooks love other oddball kooks. It's an oddball kook town. I'll always love Bellingham. I'm still an oddball kook.

I fell into the arms of a darling girl I called Uncle Larry because, like my real Uncle Larry, she was a hard drinking fisherman. She broke off her relationship, took me into her home, loved me, tried to heal me, and then went to Alaska to do some fishing. She was going to spend the winter working on a scientific fishing boat in Antarctica.

The Twenty Book Tour was successful because I managed to sell all twenty books, borrowed enough from Uncle Larry to buy a hundred more, sold those, did author readings and signings in Portland, Seattle, and Bellingham, bought another hundred books, and after that managed to sell enough books in the bar each night as it took to pay my bar bill. Obviously, not a sustainable business model. In those days, I went by Chris and if you find those original books, they say Chris Damitio on the cover instead of Vago. It was in Bellingham, at Le Chat Noir that a bartender named Random (I don't know if that was his birth name or not) began to call me the 'The Vagabond', then 'Vagabond', and finally "Vago!". Random was my favorite bartender of all time. He died a few years ago, but the name he gave me lives on and is now very much my name. Everyone from my wife to my mom calls me Vago. Thank you Random for giving me my name. May you rest in peace.

I'd been incredibly depressed in Portland and Uncle Larry saved me. I'm certain her love, her caring for me – they saved my life. I managed to sign on for a season of salmon fishing on her neighbor's fishing boat since she was gone and I couldn't just drink and sell books. It was a two-man gillnet boat so it was the two of us working for days on end in the Strait of San Juan de Fuca. We caught a lot of fish. Unfortunately, so did

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

everyone else and the price plummeted. At the end of the season, I had enough money to pay Uncle Larry what she'd loaned me and to get a flight back to Hawaii. I put together an odd little book of photos and verse called Gillnetting in the Puget Sound about six months later.

I don't know how our life together would have gone if she'd been around instead of off fishing. I know the relationship ended for me when one night when she said to me "Let's never get married."

I don't know why she said it, but again, I felt like a woman was telling me I wasn't good enough to spend a lifetime with. From that moment, I was constantly looking for someone who could convince me I was good enough. The Christian girl next door, other girls I'd dated in town, girls in the bar, Uncle Larry's girl friends (yeah, aside from giving her back the money – this was how I repaid her for saving me – douche bag move.) I don't know what she was doing during all that time. Maybe she was doing the same thing. It wasn't the type of relationship I wanted so I hopped a flight back to Hawaii while she was in the Arctic.

By the end of 2003 I was back in Hawaii, guiding tourists in kayaks on Kauai's Wailua River and desperately trying to find someone to love me. By the way, as a strategy – that never works. Salmon breed and die so if they make a mistake it doesn't matter. Humans have to be more careful and as I have pointed out repeatedly, if someone wants you too badly, you should beware the energy vampire. I know energy vampires because I had become one!



VAGO DAMITIO

LOVE IN THE BARANGAY – THE PHILIPPINES

Dating on an island like Kauai is interesting. There aren't all that many single women on the island. The Hawaiian and local (Asian and hapa-haole which is half-white) women generally don't date the mainland haoles because they usually go back to the mainland. The girls there generally find relationships and stay in them. Sure, you can have relationships last a week or two with girls on vacation, but as I'd learned, you couldn't trust your heart in those. They were flings.

My friend Larry likes to say that Kauai is the island where women go to find themselves...and other women. All the single girls on Kauai who aren't locals tend to be friends with each other. Once you've had a relationship with one of them, it becomes hard to have a relationship with another. I'd been in a fleeting relationship with a super nice girl. She had a little boy and we spent time together in the camp I'd built for myself behind the kayak shop. We'd get together for kayaking and eating coconuts. It was only after I kissed her that I realized I wanted her sister...and yeah, that's too far. On an island, that will never work. If I wanted to find love, I needed to leave the island.

My brother had fallen in love in the Philippines. He was living there with his wife and suggested I come visit. Every man on Kauai I talked to sang the virtues of the Filipinas. Hawaii is filled with Filipinas but as I said, they are generally off limits to fucking haoles like me. I was lonely. I wanted love.

I'd written the first draft of my first novel, Slackville Road . I self-published before it was ready. Twenty-two people bought it. No reviews came back except for one which said it was 'like reading someone's journal' which, truth to tell, was what it was largely based on.

I worked my ass off. Kayak guides get paid well in Hawaii and as soon as I had enough money, I booked my ticket to the Philippines. Not considering of how odd it might look if two brothers wed Filipinas, I wanted to find a nice Filipina girl and make her my bride. I thought I

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

could ride in like a white knight and rescue some poor girl who otherwise would never have a good life without me. I should have consulted with my brother about this, but I didn't want to tell anyone I was planning this in advance. In my fantasy, I married her and created a tropical paradise amidst the poverty of the Philippines.

The Philippines were a great experience. I met up with my brother and together with his wife, we explored a few islands in the Visayas. They introduced me to friends and showed me how great life in the Philippines could be. The Philippines had everything Hawaii or the mainland USA had but with more beautiful women, cheaper beer, great food, and prices so budget-friendly even with the limited funds I had, I could stay there for half a year without working.

My brother and I caught up over beers and one night he mentioned we could get real absinth in the Philippines. We bought a couple bottles and went on a bender of Edgar Allen Poe proportions which scared the hell out of his wife and left us both wrestling with inner demons.

The next day, the cute girl from the barangay (district) down the road came to clean their apartment.. I'd seen her a few times. We'd talked by the pool. She was cute, fun, and friendly. I was sunning by the pool after our two nights of absinthe and there she was. She asked if I wanted to take a walk. The morning sunlight after having survived the darkest of hells was almost as bright as the way this girl was looking at me. On a deserted rooftop looking out over Mactan Island, I knew she was the girl I'd come for. I kissed her. We were in love.

The absinthe was partly to blame, but it was magical. It was magical and I was coming down from a hallucinogenic alcoholic bender where I'd gone through hell – so of course I told her we should get married. Her reaction was perfect.

“Of course we should get married, I've been waiting all my life for you. I've never had a boyfriend because I've been waiting for a dream to save me.”

I swear she said that. I'm not making it up.

We were happy, but her family was ecstatic. Her tobacco-pipe-smoking mother smiled in approval and called the two older sisters to help make preparations. There was no time to waste. One of them was assigned to take the girl and me to the courthouse and get papers ready before I sobered up. The other was told to go out shopping with Susan and me to make sure we bought a gold ring right away. It had only been two hours since I kissed her!

We bought the ring, presents, and food for the family. I hadn't told my brother yet. Once we'd done all of that, they let me go tell my brother the

VAGO DAMITIO

good news. I didn't know it, but they figured they'd landed me as a son-in-law and my brother as a brother-in-law. It was two for the price of one. Never mind that I didn't have any money. They thought my brother was loaded.

These were incredibly poor people. They lived in one of the poorest barangays on Cebu and I don't blame them for grabbing this (me) as a stroke of luck. They weren't going to let me get away. The girl was sincere. I never doubted her until much later and with reflection, those doubts were planted by other people.

The barangay was preparing a wedding. I went back to the apartments to tell my brother and his wife the good news. Not surprisingly, that went over like a bucket of shit being dumped on the dining table.

"You've been here two weeks and you're going to marry the cleaning girl?" My brother asked. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

He was right. I hadn't made a plan. It was then I started my master plan. First, I poured us both more absinthe. Yes, I needed a plan. I planned to introduce bee keeping and mead making to the barangay. The family would learn to create their own liquor. We would buy native handicrafts and sell them on Ebay. We would start an organic mango farm. We would branch into tours and activities for tourists. I was ready to whip the whole family into line. First, I needed them to know I didn't have any money. My brother made me promise to make it clear that he and his wife didn't come as part of the package. The family would need to work with me to make this work.

The next day, I set up a family meeting in the barangay and laid out all the rules. They nodded, agreed and told me how great my ideas were. They agreed when I said it was important to keep their jobs because we needed everyone to contribute (my brother had told me they would all be quitting their jobs over the next few days since they had me to take care of them now). They smiled, nodded, and agreed. By the way, my brother and I were into the absinthe again and I hadn't yet learned that people often smile, nod, and agree when they don't know what the hell is going on.

The sisters were lining up paperwork and arranging the wedding party. They needed more money and went to my sister-in-law to borrow it, since they were already related by our engagement. My industry co-op plans were spread through the barangay. Somehow it changed into me building a huge factory in the barangay, building new houses for everyone related to Susan, and giving union jobs to everyone else. I was going to build a tourist resort and lift everyone out of poverty. I was fabulously wealthy and rich. Susan quit her job, Everyone told her it was

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

shameful for a rich woman to have a low-level job. My real sister-in-law was telling my soon to be sisters-in-law that she and my brother weren't part of the deal and they wouldn't give money to the family. The sisters-in-law started rumors (cheezmeez) that my brother's wife was the dragon lady of the family and kept tight control over both my brother's and my own bank accounts. She became the enemy of the barangay. The woman who kept everyone from getting new houses and great jobs. She was hated.

The rumor mill in the barangay is rapid and vicious. Soon, no one spoke to my sister-in-law unless it was to yell threats or taunts her. She refused to leave the gated apartment community they lived in because of death threats. The new cleaning lady (because Susan had quit) told my sister-in-law that rumor had it as soon as the wedding was finalized, Susan's brothers, notorious knife fighters, were going to kill me so the family could take my fortune. The legal wedding was scheduled two days later.

My brother had enough. "Dude, I love you, but you need to go. This will blow over soon enough once you are gone, but with you here, it will never stop."

I couldn't leave her. Was all this true? Had it gone so crazy? What happened to the true love?

I came up with a new plan. It was a test. I wrote a fake letter saying I needed to come back to the USA right away or I would lose everything. If I went back, I'd become rich. The girl translated the letter for her family. I told them love was more important than money. I told them I would stay and marry Susan. I told them I would have to move into their house while we worked to build a future. They told me to leave. Except for Susan. She said, "Just stay." I agreed. She told them.

Uproar. Yelling with her, arguing with her. Now she said "You should go. Get more money and then come back and marry me."

So I left. I've never felt more guilty about anything in my life. I know because of the situation, the way this situation had gone, my brother and his wife's situation and more that I made the right decision. I had to go, but I hated it. I hated it but I still enjoyed my life.

I spent two more months in the Philippines. I lived in a beach side bungalow on the island of Bohol where I drank too much, taught the locals how to make pizza in their restaurant, explored, scuba dived, snorkeled, and enjoyed life. I found a girlfriend who I understood from the beginning that I would leave and never come back. She was fine with that and, while she tried to get me to change my mind, begged me to marry her, I don't think she was too heartbroken when I left.

VAGO DAMITIO

As for the cleaning girl. I never saw her again. I wonder how long she kept the ring?



SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

BECOMING BUDDHIST

I left the Philippines and traveled back to Hawaii by way of Guam. Guam and Hawaii are magnificent, but, I was depressed, lonely and didn't have the energy to jump back into limited dating pools again. I bought a beat up Ford minivan for \$150 on Craigslist and moved into the upscale beach town of Kailua on the island of Oahu.

Kailua is an odd place. On one side is Kaneohe, where a U.S. Marine base dominates the economy of a town is filled with locals (Hawaiian, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino – not Haole). On the other side is Waimanalo, where Hawaiians live in slightly better than third-world conditions. Behind Kailua is the Pali mountain range which separates Kailua from Honolulu. In front of Kailua are the uninhabited Mokulua islands and two thousand miles of Pacific Ocean.

I picked Kailua because it is predominantly a local haole town. It had a Starbucks, a farmers market, beautiful beaches, and no tourist hotels. I already had a storage locker there containing all my worldly possessions. It is the address I have on my drivers license. 150 Hamakua Drive #377. It's a storage unit with mail boxes. I'm still a resident of Kailua.

I became friends with the lady at the storage locker place. Half-Chinese and Half-Hawaiian, she was beautiful but older than any women I had dated – about ten years older than me. We liked each other, but the age difference kept us from becoming involved further than a friendship level. That, and the fact she was looking for a sugar daddy and I lived in a \$100 van.

Life was good. I was earning a few dollars from sales of Rough Living. Eventually though, free copies outranked my author page on Lulu.com. The income dried up though I continued to get email from people who were inspired by it. I was taking piecemeal work doing anything that paid. I spent the day breaking up a concrete patio for \$20, then sat in Starbucks in the evening working on Slackville Road, then bought beer, drove to the beach and drank until I was drunk. That was

VAGO DAMITIO

typical. It wasn't healthy and it was getting to me.

I was lonely, depressed from all the drinking, becoming paranoid about living in my car, unemployed, and miserable. I named the van 'Pig' because it broke down every day. A friend was earning a decent living buying misspelled domain names and flipping websites. I told him about the Philippines he decided to move there. In gratitude he taught me a little about websites, blogs, and domain names.

I started a website which was called Incredible Fukn.us. I was sure it was brilliant. I didn't realize my rebellious streak and disdain for authority were the worst ways to make money online. It wasn't a great way to market myself or anything else to people who bought commercial goods. That was a common thread in my failures – I was writing for people like me. Anti-consumer, anti-capitalist, rebellious losers with no money. I didn't buy anything and yet I was trying to sell to people like me.

None of my friends had money. Actually, one girl in Bellingham who I'd unsuccessfully pursued through three relationships (not with me) had managed to transition from hippie backpacker to landlord of multiple properties through a strategic relationship with a savvy builder. After she left that relationship, she had equity and cash and didn't mind spending it. She'd told me once "The secret to getting everything is to say Nam Myoho Renghe Kyo."

After I returned to the USA from my first Asian trip in 2001, I was reminded of that. As I hitchhiked down the Pacific Coast Highway I was picked up by a 'retired' pentecostal pastor turned Buddhist. He handed me this crazy Japanese scroll, told me it was a gohonzon and said he'd found the secret to life – you have to say "Nam Myoho Renghe Kyo."

I was reaching the end of my rope in Kailua. I was out of money, I was late paying my storage locker/mailbox fee. I'd received nothing but rejection letters for Slackville Road if I received anything at all. I woke with a hangover every day in a broken down van. Life wasn't working wonderful.

I dreamed of the Bellingham girl one night and she said again – "To get everything you want, all you have to do is say "Nam Myoho Renghe Kyo." I woke up crying in my van by the side of the road. I said Nam Myoho Renghe Kyo over and over. That morning, I went to my storage locker to see if I could find the gohonzon the Buddhist in California had given me.

As I walked in the door, my bright and beautiful Hawaiian-Chinese friend said "Are you ready to become a Buddhist yet?"

"I'm ready to try anything," I told her.

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

I don't know how to convince you all of this is true because what she said next changed my life.

"The first thing you need to do is say Nam Myoho Renghe Kyo." she said. I began to weep and she came around the counter and held me, "You really are ready," she told me.

I was. I didn't want to die. But death would have been better than the life I was leading.



VAGO DAMITIO

RECREATING MYSELF

She introduced me to SGI – Soka Gakkai International and within a few days I was chanting Nam Myoho Renghe Kyo with millions of people around the world who chanted for material, spiritual, emotional, and mental rewards. Here's the funny thing...it worked.

Within a month I was landing jobs as a casting assistant on shows like America's Next Top Model and The Apprentice. I almost landed a job as a production assistant on Lost but Pig broke down on the way to the interview so I arrived late. I must not have been chanting enough.

Within three months I moved into a beautiful apartment a block from my favorite beach. I landed a job as a high end chauffeur – and get this, I was driving around Hawaii in a \$65,000 jet-black Lincoln Navigator. It was my personal vehicle when I wasn't working. I was earning great money.

I was dating again and I chanted for love frequently. My blog Incredible Fukn.us began to get hundreds of visitors and commentators. I lucked onto a program that paid me \$200 a month for links. I was selling used books from the Kailua friends of the library bookshop online. I bought them for ten cents each and sold them for \$2 -\$50 each on my new website Fuknbooks.com. I planned to start a whole franchise with Fuknclothing.com, Fuknmusic.com Fuknvideos.com and more. I should have kept chanting for that success – but I wanted love. I chanted for love.

Six months into chanting a beautiful professional woman came into my life. She had money, class, style, charm, intelligence, and wit. She was beautiful, sexy, she loved to travel and she loved sci-fi. Yeah, I was in love. The chanting had brought her to me.

Three months into our perfect relationship, I asked her to marry me. She had already bought the rings – solid platinum wedding bands for him and her. She had been assigned to go to Africa to do foreign aid work for three months. We were in love, we planned to be married when she

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

returned. For some reason, when she left – I stopped chanting.

If you want to read how the relationship self-destructed you can get the gist of it from my not so happy fairy tale The Princess and the Vagabond. I was miserable and lonely without her. I became plagued by self-doubt. How could I be good enough for this woman? I only had a two-year associates degree in Journalism. All of her friends had PhDs. They were all rich.

During the three months she was gone, I enrolled in the University of Hawaii, took a real estate licensing course and exam, brushed up on my French, learned as much as I could about her industry and, saved my money – except the money I was getting shitfaced on at the end of each day. One thing I've learned in life is benders lead to overwhelming depression and self loathing. I believe the heavy drinking also led to my giving up on the chanting. Alcohol abuse and magic don't coexist. Where one is, the other will flee.

She was a beautiful part of my life for the next three years. We explored Hawaii, Tahiti, and had a lot of fun together. She changed my life and tried to teach me what it was to be a man. She tried to teach me the lessons I needed to learn in order to move to the next stage of my life. There was one lesson I couldn't master though. The healing power of forgiveness. If I could have learned how to forgive, I could have stopped torturing us both. We loved each other. She forgave me for the worst things I've ever done. I couldn't forgive her or myself. Most of our time together was filled with fun and joy, but I kept tearing at those wounds. The torture was too much. I couldn't watch as I continued to torture her. I loved her too much, but I couldn't stop.

We both realized it wasn't going to work – because of me - and I moved out.

I had committed to my degree, so rather than running away to some other place, I stayed to finish what I had started. I wonder what might have happened if I would have kept chanting?

VAGO DAMITIO

WALKING AROUND OAHU

During my last semester break while I was in university, I should have done what all my classmates were doing, but for some reason those fifteen years between me and them made it hard for me to hang out with them in Cabo or Fort Lauderdale.

I'd done enough binge holiday drinking and I was looking for something more profound. I wanted to do something I could remember for the rest of my life. Something that would challenge and change me. I decided to walk all the way around the perimeter of the island of Oahu. I estimated two weeks to hoof it all the way.

Much to my surprise, despite scouring the internet, the only mention of walking the perimeter had been written by Mark Twain who went around Oahu with Queen Emma. That clinched the deal. I invited my friends and classmates. I also was using a new thing called Twitter and 'tweeted' that anyone who wanted could join me to walk all or a portion. I had friends come out for different legs of the walk, but I was the only one crazy enough to want to do the whole 227 miles.

Day 1

I left my apartment in Manoa at 7 am on May 19th, 2008. I didn't know if it was possible to walk the entire shoreline since 1/3 of Oahu is controlled by the US Military. I figured there was only one way to find out. All there is to it, is to do it. I ate a papaya and began walking.

Waikiki was surprisingly crowded with old people. They were all out exercising. Already my pack chafed because the load was too heavy and poorly packed. Past the venerable Outrigger Canoe Club, balancing atop a seawall, a bit of scrambling over exposed reef, I reached one of the hidden parks on Diamond Head Lighthouse.

I found a narrow walkway carved in the lava filled with sand and piles of hippie stones along the way. There was something powerful and mysterious about this place and I felt chicken skin despite the hippie

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND
stone piles. This is a beach that can be reached with some serious effort.

Later, I passed surfers, sunbathers, and finally came to the magnificent Shangri-La Mansion built by tobacco heiress Doris Duke. Black Point where Shangri-La sits was filled with hundreds of local kids having a ditch day. Security guards watched bemusedly from Shangri-La above.

Four beefy local guys were drinking Corona's, listening to the radio, and having a ditch day of their own. They offered a beer and we began to talk story. They asked where I was going and I told them. One of them said "No can, Bra."

His friend, disagreed "Can. Uncle Kimo, he did'em same ting, Bra. Can."

"Oh, is that what you guys in Manoa are doing now?" the third one chimed in. "We did that when I was 14" he said which caused the other two to turn to him with "Can?"

"Can." He said it with finality. "We took bout a week to do 'em"

I'd been thinking ten to thirteen days. A week was fast but from that moment, I was competing with his 14-year-old memory of himself. The safe part of myself told my ego I was 36 not 14, he stayed with people he knew along the way, his memory may have been faulty, and he wasn't carrying an uncomfortable pack filled with gear he didn't need. It didn't matter. Seven days became the goal.

In Hawaii Kai, I found an old shopping cart on the side of the road. With a chuckle I put my bag in it and began to push my cart and possessions down the road. There was no beach there because the road follows the water and then cliffs rise. I was taking a homeless vacation. I soon left the cart behind. I was ashamed to push it down the road. The trail was hot as I humped past Hanauma Bay. I felt energized to see Diamond Head behind me and Koko Head beside me. As I crested past Hanauma, the view was epic. Three volcanoes and me.

I found a place to roll out my ground pad and sleeping bag. I sat cracked open a beer, lit a smoke, and watched the amazing Hawaiian landscape around me change in the day's last light. As the sun set, an almost-full moon rose as my constant companion on the stark vulcan landscape. Waves crashed on three sides and behind rose Kokohead, which Hawaiian stories say is the detachable vagina of the Goddess Pele's sister.

The problem with tweeting the whole trip was my battery was already dead and I discovered the hand crank charger I'd bought didn't work. Here's a pro-tip: test gear before you're in the field.

VAGO DAMITIO

Day 2

I woke up to a light rain. This was unpleasant since I was lying in the open and not prepared for weather and it was midnight. We'd had the hottest weather of the year the past few weeks but this was the return of long-absent showers. I stuffed my gear into my bag did a rainy midnight hike to Sandy's Beach Park in the hope of finding a covered shelter. I could see by light of the moon.

The landscape was made more spectacular under the blue light as the rain continued to fall. The exposed moon peered from among the clouds. Once I reached Sandy's, the rain stopped. The moon only wanted me to move. I woke at dawn and saw the moon setting over the lip of the Hanauma crater. I bid her a good day's rest and used my homemade alcohol stove to make coffee.

The clay and hard-pack sand trails of the Makapu'u wilderness is filled with inlets and bogs. The stark outline of Pele's chair came into view as I walked through the volcanic wasteland and looked back at the rim of Koko Crater.

Rabbit and Goat Islands and the beautiful Koolau range extended up the windward Oahu coastline. After the dry and arid south shore, the verdant windward side lay before me like paradise.

The cliffs dropped hundreds of feet to my right as large buses screamed by on my left. I felt a mirror clip my pack and imagined tumbling to my death below. It was death defying.

Hawaiian flags at the Makapu'u and Cockroach Bay campgrounds stood proudly in front of Magnum P.I.'s Robin Masters Estate. I reached an ancient fishpond where I met a bus driver out with his dogs.

"Be careful on the West Side of the Island," he told me. "They're animals over there. Too much poverty, desperation, and the drugs." He wasn't the first warn me about the Leeward coast. Nor was he the last.

I passed Waimanalo parks, where the homeless camps built of tarps serve as the last refuge of Hawaiians displaced by the success of their land. Every camp had a pile of bicycle and bicycle parts in front of it. Near the garbage cans there were always several abandoned frames. At Bellows Air Force Base, I wasn't allowed on the beach. The road was hot and I hated walking next to speeding cars. I laid down in a shady ditch to take break and rest my feet. My bag was too heavy but I couldn't bring myself to discard anything since this was only the second day.

In Kailua, I met a local named "T". He was fucked up on crystal meth 'ice' and sat next to me as I looked out at the Moku Lua Islands. He told me he loved cruising the beach and watching crazy haoles. He told me (without my asking) he loved older white women with big fleshy butts.

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

Then he told me that if I stayed on the beach, we could watch the teenyboppers skinny dipping and getting fucked in the wee hours. Much to my amusement, he called vagina 'abalone'. He dreamed of a beach where women lay naked and you could walk up and eat all the abalone you wanted. He called it "Eat Beach".

"Eat Beach is my dream," he told me.

"T" made me nervous. Ice-heads are unpredictable. I wasn't going to be alone that night and I wanted to get rid of him but didn't know how to flush him.

"I have to go take a shit," I told him. He didn't follow me, thank fucking god.

That night, two incredibly cute twenty-one-year-old girls came out to walk and camp with me. One of them a California-Japanese surfer girl, the other a sexy blonde beach bunny. We were friends from school. I had a crush on the blonde. I had a crush on the California girl too. They were both sexy and cute, but was sure I was too old for either of them. Seventeen years is a huge difference when you're twenty-one.

We camped on Kalamas Beach and lit a small beach fire. We were far down the beach from where "T" liked to watch people. A nice fire and a bottle of wine and then we crashed around the fire. I woke up once to see "T" walking down the beach pushing his bicycle. I don't know if he saw me sleeping on the beach with two beautiful young girls. It rained again in the middle of the night. We all had to snuggle under my tarp. I didn't mind at all.

DAY 3

The girls caught a bus back to Honolulu and I hiked on the road past Mokapu Peninsula and the Kaneohe Marine Base. The shoreline was again off limits. A light drizzle began but became a tropical deluge. My pack was soaked by the time I reached Kahalu. It was an elephant on my back. I pushed on to Kualoa Ranch and the campground at Chinaman's Hat. It was sundown when I arrived.

The park was deserted because the Mayor had done one of his sweeps to run the homeless out of public parks. I found a for a dry place to sleep under the lifeguard stand. I refuse to sleep in a restroom, but the lifeguard stand was exposed to view. If the park had been swept it was closed for cleaning and they would likely come back and sweep again.

A car with a spotlight swept over the grounds. I stuffed my sleeping bag in my pack and stashed it below some rocks. I hid behind a tree in the center of the park. As the car drove around, I moved around the tree, all the way around. It was like a pink panther movie. They did two

VAGO DAMITIO

sweeps and I went around the tree twice. Finally they left and I unrolled my sleeping bag, and slept like a dream. I woke at dawn to the surprised grunt of a jogger who was surprised to see me. It rained and drizzled all night but I stayed dry under the lifeguard stand. In the gray light of dawn, the island called Chinaman's Hat was stark and beautiful.

DAY 4

I had a huge blister on my right toe from wet shoes and socks. I hiked by the magnificent Kualoa Valley where Jurassic Park was filmed and got stoned with a guy from the telephone company in his truck on a roadside beach. I walked by as he was lighting up, smiled, and he invited me.

"Careful on the West side, bra," he told me.

I wanted sunshine and a place to dry out my gear and lighten my load. I rounded Kahana Bay, one of the oldest settled places in Hawaii. Kalo (taro) patches and Hawaiian agriculture dominate this area. The sun struggled to come out and I rooted for it as I entered Punalu'u. I'd created a magical backpackers hostel called Countryside Cabins there back in 2002. We built a mini golf course, had a bonfire every night, and gathered a group of thirty international travelers who refused to leave Hawaii..

Things imploded when the owner got greedy. We all scattered. I visited the cabins and saw entropy had won. Some of my paintings were there. Graffiti by the flight attendant still adorned my former hut. A fucked up guy sat in it drinking cheap beer in the early morning while listening to Van Halen. It was depressing.

Back on the beach, I met a group of shore casting fishermen. They shared their beer and poke with me as I dried my gear in the sun. Fisherman #1 asked me where I was hiking to. Fisherman #2 said no one would mess with me sleeping on the beach on this side of the island but I better be careful on the West side. Fisherman #3 said it was good exercise. Fisherman #4, the youngest of them, cracked open a beer and said "Too much exercise". We all laughed. I love Hawaiians.

That night, I camped at Malekahana between Laie and Kuhuku. My blisters were horrible and the spot was beautiful. I decided to stay for two nights. My body needed rest and I needed to dry out my shoes. My \$30 per night cabana next to Malakahana Bay was dream-like I had been challenged to the edge of my endurance and by somehow passing through these challenges and keeping on, I had been rewarded with this perfect place to call home for a couple of days

A family with a crying baby moved into the cabana next door that evening. At first I was bothered but then I realized I had once been a

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND
crying baby in campgrounds and someday I wanted to take my own baby to campgrounds. I was able to sleep despite the crying, after that. It was a sweet sound, believe it or not..

DAY 5

My feet ached and my crotch had been rubbed raw. It was on fire. I drank lots and lots of water - dehydration is the main enemy. Here is what I wrote in my journal as I sat on that beach:

"The past couple of days kicked my ass. My feet are angry, the chafing is worse, and man did I need to let my clothes dry out, wash my shirts, and enjoy where I'm at. I admit, it's hard not hitting the road right away. A large part of me is like "go-go-go", but this is the way to do it. People keep asking me what my cause is. Does everything have to be for a cause these days? My cause is sublime. I'm learning a new respect and love for this place I live. That's cause enough."

The girls were coming to camp with me again. They were bringing LSD. It made me nervous. The last time I had dropped acid was back in 2000. My friend and I had been shot at by rednecks in Acme, Washington while camping. Since then, I'd avoided it but there was no denying it was a perfect time and spot. I was nervous because I had a crush on her on the blonde girl.

Before they arrived but after I knew they were bringing the LSD, I looked across the camp and saw a redneck guy in a camouflage truck shooting arrows at a target. It was a mini flashback to getting shot at the last time I tripped so I figured I better go talk to the guy. I walked over to his site up using the excuse of being interested in his bow and met this self proclaimed "Hawaiian Redneck". He let me shoot a quiver of arrows at the target and I satisfied my own fear he wasn't going to come kill us in the night. Far from it. He was camping with his family and enjoying being outdoors. He wasn't a redneck

The girls arrived before dark and put up the tent, dissolved the acid soaked sugar cubes in water, portioned it out, and lit a fire. The trip was good. We laughed and laughed. The little hut turned into smokehouse and we took a nighttime visit to a mini mushroom shrine someone built in a hau tree tangle tunnel not far from camp. It was eerie, beautiful, and sacred.

We sat on the beach and had a swim. I felt close to these girls. I loved

VAGO DAMITIO

them both. The blonde girl touched me in the best light way. I was on acid, and am generally confused about women anyway - I wasn't real sure what to do. I knew I wanted to cuddle with her again that night. I wanted to talk and laugh with her. I wanted to kiss her. So I did. It was nice. The acid was funny. It changed things. I knew I would suffer the next day, but it was good. I didn't mind.

DAY 6

The walk to sharks cove was tortuous with heat. I had a tiny bit of weed and at Sharks cove I bought a beer and smoked some grass. A homeless lady sat talking to herself near where I was resting, I tried to talk to her but she wasn't interested in talking to anyone else. So I talked to myself too. Pushing on from Sharks Cove, I decided to make Haleiwa my camp for the night.

During this time, LOST was being filmed on Oahu's North Shore. They had a closed set and it was normal to see actors around. I would see them at the gym, in the grocery store, or walking in Kailua. All of this led to...

The LOST Incident.

I knew the beach where the TV show LOST was filmed was somewhere around Haleiwa but wasn't sure where. I wanted to get off the road and walked around a gate and onto a dirt road that looked like it led to the water. Within a minute, a stoned looking guy in a white car came up the road and told me to stop. He was as stoned as I was. I was sure of it.

“Did I stumble onto a CIA base or something?”

“No, man,” he said. “This is the set of LOST.”

“I’ll leave.” I was about 100 feet into the property.

“No. Stay here.” It wasn't a friendly invitation to hang out.

He had no power to detain me and if I stayed, I suspected that I might get a trespassing ticket. I turned and walked away, left the property and ignored his calls to come back. That was when Uncle Nasty showed up with his ugly attitude. He was the head of security on the set. He pulled up in a big white SUV and began shouting at me. I kept walking and he threatened to ‘throw me on the ground and stomp me to shit’. I kept walking.

“Fuck you.” My blisters and heavy pack didn't have time for his bad vibe.

“You think I won’t” he asked me “You think I won’t fuck you up?”

Now I was nervous. This guy hadn't been smoking weed. He was obviously flying on ice.

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

I kept walking, “I’m sure you would, I’ve been walking for five days and I’m sure you wouldn’t have any problem fucking me up. I left, I won’t go back, it’s done. You win.”

He refused to let go. He grabbed me by the shoulder and swung me around. I had my cellphone in my hand to call the police. He grabbed it and started scrolling through the numbers. I was scared. He was a big crazy fucking dude. He didn’t find what he was looking for. He pulled out his phone. I’m calling you..I’ve got your number. He didn’t have my number, how could he have my number? He dialed a number on his phone and looked confused when my phone in his other hand didn’t ring.

“I’ll fucking kill you,” he said.

“Can I have my phone back,” I tried to stay calm. Tried to be reasonable.

“Don’t tell me no stupid stories...I know you are one of them,” he said. “You’re trying to get me fired.” Fucking paranoia always flies with ice-heads.

“You’re one of them fucking Canadian fans, I know you is one of those obsessed fucking fans.” Spittle flew from his mouth to my face as he spoke. He hated Canadian fans. I stayed calm, answered his demands, and prepared to throw my pack at him and run. Then I said fuck it. I turned and began to walk away.

“Hey, get back here,” I ignored him. A car pulled up. “Here’s your friends.”

I turned and saw a Canadian maple leaf air freshener hanging from the mirror. The car was filled with pleasant looking Canadian looking people. Uncle Nasty stalked towards them and I turned to walk away.

The stoned guy stood there smirking the whole time. That bothered me more than the other guy’s threats. He would have watched while the other guy attacked me. Fuck LOST.

DAY 7

I slept on the beach in Haleiwa and when I woke, big Hawaiian guys were carrying tents, chairs, and other barbecue accessories onto the beach. One scary looking guy kept looking at me. Huge, angry looking local dude with lots of intense jailhouse tattoos. It was time to go.

He came over as I packed my gear.

“Here you go Bra,” he said “Something to warm you up, sand gets cold at night.” He brought me a hot cup of coffee. He and his sons were setting up for a multi-family barbecue day. Family from all over the island was coming to hang out and spend time together at the beach. It was Memorial Day Weekend. We talked story about how the island had

VAGO DAMITIO

changed since he was a kid. He and his sons were surprised I was walking all around the island.

He lamented “No offense, because I know you come from there, but it’s sad to see the mainlandification of this island. When I was a kid, it was all about people helping each other and we had a sense of community. Now, my sons are growing up in this place where everyone is as selfish as they are on the mainland. It’s all about the individual now and no one takes care of the aina (land). We get all these barriers and rules going up that separate us from each other and the aina. It’s sad.”

He too, warned me to be careful on the West Side because of the heat and the homeless camps. His warning made me more nervous than ever. Poverty and drugs created a desperate situation.

On the trail from Haleiwa to Kaena Point, I met people dressed in expensive trekking gear. They were brusque and rude when I tried to talk to them. Funny to see how they acted versus how the tattooed guy, the fishermen, or other regular people did. Night and day.

Kaena Point is rugged and beautiful. Seabirds abound. The sun was brutal hot but the beauty of the place made that acceptable. I figured I would get robbed and beaten the moment people on the West side saw my haole ass come around the bend at Kaena. It didn't happen on the trail. I made it all the way to where the road begins. That was where they set upon me.

Friendly and curious people attacked me with smiles and aloha on the scary West side. People asked where I was headed, how my trip had been, and waved as they drove past me. One guy offered me a soda as I walked by he and his family. His wife pressed a bag of cookies into my hands. In walking all the way around Oahu, I found the West side to be the most friendly and generous part of the island. Aloha lives on the West side of Oahu.

Further down the road, a guy was sitting in his car at an interesting looking pullout. Someone had built stone steps, a picnic table, and a small garden. I shrugged off my pack and talked story with him. He lived in his car, and couldn't find a job, but he had brought interesting rocks from all over the beach to create a beautiful park. His friend had built and brought the picnic table. He told me how one interesting stone had called him and he'd made it into a seat. Then, he watched from a distance minutes after putting it into place as an old tourist lady came over and sat on it. It made him happy.

“That stone called to her and she didn’t hesitate to see if it was stable or anything.”

In Makaha, I showered at the beach park and ditched the clothes I

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

was wearing and about half of my gear. I just left it next to the shower. It felt good to have the pack lighter and to be clean. I was offered rides from strangers who saw me walking. They didn't care I looked homeless and bedraggled. I spoke to everyone I passed and they were enthusiastic about my walk. They all told me to let people know people were kind on the West side. They said the West side is the last place real Aloha exists. They they demonstrated it.

I had covered ground than any other day. I was exhausted and the sun was going down. A couple of homeless guys bummed smokes from me. They offered to let me stay in their camp. They told me that after dark, it really wasn't safe to be alone on the beach. About that time my friend called. He was bringing me a meal and some supplies. To be honest, it was bad timing. He wanted to walk with me but I was ready to settle down for the night. I had a safety net with the new friends but no guarantee of what would be up the road.

I couldn't say no, though. We drank beers as we walked with the dark coming fast. I knew it was much rougher where we were headed. The Mayor's sweeps pushed all the island' homeless to this one area. Just further was where the west side homeless camps did get rough. It was getting dark, I find where I will camp during light and then move back to it after dark. No chance of that tonight because I recognized he had come out to walk with me because he wanted to make sure no one messed with me.

As we walked through Waianae, I looked next to me and saw how big a guy he was. A giant. Nobody was going to mess with us, that was for sure. We walked through Waianae, smoked a joint next to a canal, and scarfed down food at Burger King and then he thumbed a ride back to his truck.

There were lots of homeless and lots of families camping for Memorial Day weekend. My best bet was to find a family camp and crash on the sand below it. I walked down to Maili Beach and found a big family camp complete with a karaoke tent. If it hadn't of been so dark and me so tired, I would have made friends and done some singing. I couldn't have been worse than most of them, but then again, some of them were good. I rolled out my bag and crashed on the sand. Aside from getting woke by teenage local girls sneaking back to their tents after visiting boys on the beach, I had no problems. The West side knows aloha.

DAY 8

It was like walking through a poor but beautiful third world country. The

VAGO DAMITIO

poverty on the Leeward (West) side is astounding and obscene when one sees it up close. This is Hawaii but it looks like the slums of Rio or Jakarta. I followed the old Hawaii railroad tracks. The coral used to make the bed is sharp. Beautiful arid landscape along the coast with innovative tarpitecture set up in the most precarious places to avoid the Mayor's sweeps and enjoy the beauty of the rugged Leeward side.

I reached the Ko Olina Resort before midday and experienced culture shock as well-dressed tourists and golfers in expensive condos enjoyed their wealthy enclave. No wonder the locals on the West side are pissed off. I followed the tracks through the resort to the Ewa plains without incident. I was short on water and feeling dehydrated as I walked through the plains. Finally the tracks brought me to the edge of Kapolei, Oahu's newest city, now known as the second city.

It was bizarre. It's all so new. New roads, new houses, new malls, new everything I'd walked into some mainland suburb from the dry and dusty Ewa plains. The road to reach Honolulu was the Farrington Highway and the H-1 but I wanted to avoid any more road walking if possible so I hopped over a new vinyl fence in the midst of new houses and new lawns and found myself next to a huge new ditch.

I walked North along the ditch until I found a place I could cross (it was big) and then I found the railroad tracks again. I followed them into the old train depot filled with rotting railroad cars. Agonizing pain went with each step now but I told myself I had to keep on keeping on. There was no way from Ewa to Honolulu without going through military bases but I kept going forward because it was 5 miles back to the highway.

A mile ahead lay Iroquois Point Naval Depot. There was no way to reach the other side without going back to the Farrington Highway. I was exhausted and disappointed. I laid down under a tree in a small park, refilled my water, and fell asleep to the sound of jazz coming from a pickup truck with a bored looking guy sitting in the back watching his daughters on the playground equipment. I heard a nasally mainland voice in a nearby house complaining to his wife about homeless people moving into the park. I drifted to sleep.

I woke renewed energy. I would go to Iroquois point. At the guard station, they told me there was no way to get across Pearl Harbor and they weren't going to let me on base. I did get on base and while I'd love to tell you that story, but I'm afraid it will have to be over beers if we should ever meet in person. I borrowed a kayak from in front of some officer's pretty beach house.

I launched into Pearl Harbor. I don't think civilians are allowed to take kayaks into Pearl Harbor, but there I was and the paddling was

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

glorious. The water was still, the air was crisp, and it may have been the single most enjoyable part of my trip. I wanted to paddle out to sea and go all the way to Honolulu but I'm not a thief. I landed at Hickam Air Force Base and wrote a note which I left on the kayak. "Please return this kayak to Iroquois Point Officer Housing where it lives. Thank you."

I walked through Hickam, onto the Pearl Harbor Naval Base, and out the front gate. Let me emphasize here a bearded scruffy looking man with a huge pack had managed to infiltrate three highly secure military bases and pearl harbor. No one searched my pack or stopped me. And again, I'm not telling how I entered the first base.

From Pearl Harbor, I trudged my way along the Nimitz Freeway and walked until I reached the Honolulu International Airport. I took a handful of aspirin and walked the last stretch. I met with friends for beers at Aloha Tower, and then walked the last few miles through Honolulu back to my house in Manoa. My friends took my pack, so that last stretch wasn't too terrible despite the blisters.

The next few days were a metamorphosis. I could never look at Oahu the same way. The walk injected the essence of Oahu into me. Oahu is changed forever within me and is now and always a part of me. I love the land and the people who live on her. I am Oahuan. I can see much more clearly the good and the bad points about Oahu and I'm rooting for the good. From that moment, whenever anyone has asked where I am from, I tell them Oahu. I am kama'aina and I always will be.



VAGO DAMITIO

WORKING THE SYSTEM – STUDENT LIFE

Anthropology. I figured since I loved travel, I should learn more about the world. I should make it my life, I should focus on learning more about the people and cultures I was going to see. Never mind a career in anthropology requires a master's degree. I studied for knowledge, not for a job. To be a student, I abandoned my great driving job. That was okay, I had a plan. A stupid plan. Take student loans and pay for everything with them.

I was a good student. I took a heavy course load and maintained close to a 4.0 grade point average. I was managing editor of the university paper, the President of the Honor Society, President of the university chapter of the Sierra Club, founder of a hiking club called Hawaii Hikers, and a board member for other important committees. I studied Arabic, Indonesian, cultural anthropology, online anthropology, and Japanese culture.

My plan was to get my degree, go to Japan, and teach English. In 2006, there were a million job offers for teachers in Japan with any 4 year degree. The jobs paid stupendous wages and it didn't matter what your degree was in. In 2007 the US economy tanked. In 2008, graduates began taking any job they could including all those great English teacher jobs. The schools had a glut of candidates so they became more picky. Suddenly, the degree needed to be in English or TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) – Masters Degrees were preferred.

I graduated in December of 2008 with an Honors Degree in Anthropology and what almost amounted to a minor in filmmaking. I had \$45,000 in debt – I couldn't find a job that paid more than \$12,000 per year in Hawaii or Japan. My old job was gone, my classmates were all going away, and there were no jobs to be had in Hawaii for me. It was the height of the recession – I decided to do what was logical.

And in case you are wondering...Here's my funny track record:
2000 – Joined a dot-com. Dot com bubble bursts.

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

2003 – Earned my Series 7 and Section 63. Stock market bubble bursts.

2006 – Real estate license. Housing bubble Bursts.

2008 – Graduated University. World wide recession.

There were less jobs for graduates than there had been in 50 years – especially graduates with useless degrees who were 37 years old. I decided to leave America and abandon my loans. It meant leaving Hawaii, but at that point, I was sure there might be somewhere else in the world that could compare. Today, I still haven't found it.

My Traveling Suit

In the months before I left Hawaii, I was preparing for my trip. Here is what I wrote before I hit the road:

What is smooth living? It's exactly what it says. Getting rid of the rough spots and getting into the life you have. If you're alive and you have figured out how to enjoy that fact, that is smooth living. I haven't solved mankind's dilemmas, or my own. I have figured out a few lessons to make my life more enjoyable. It wouldn't surprise me if some of those lessons and ideas are useful to another person in this world billions.

I've discarded almost everything I own in the past year. There are a few possessions I want to put in a house if I ever own one someday and I've sent those to my dad's. Turns out the old man is pretty nice after all. Family heirlooms, artwork, meaningful souvenirs I have picked up traveling, and gifts from friends. Not useful equipment a traveling man needs...or wants. So that stuff can be counted as gone. The rest has gone to the free store, eBay, friends, or the dump.

There are a few essentials I need. My laptop, my digital camera, and my cell phone. I picked up a leather messenger bag on eBay for \$75. I picked up a Patagonia wheelie bag for \$100. It's a convertible backpack/suitcase in carry-on size. What I can carry in those two bags and wear is what I am limited to.

I have a pair of nice Italian leather shoes from Goodwill (\$7) and I have a gray pinstripe suit I found in an abandoned suitcase that I had tailored. The tailor told me it was a \$600 suit, but the tailor's work was \$60. Three button-down shirts at Old Navy for \$10 each, Banana Republic jacket from Salvation Army (\$6). Reversible Geoffrey Beane belt I bought at a yard sale (\$2). Two pairs of trousers, swim trunks, and a couple of t-shirts. Socks and underwear plus my fedora. The guy I bought it from (\$27) said it belonged to Humphrey Bogart. Smooth living requires a hat. Mine is Italian and was made in the 1940s. It may or may

VAGO DAMITIO

not have belonged to Bogey.

\$135 worth of clothes, \$175 worth of bags, and \$1000 worth of technology.

As I write this four years later, my leather bag is next to me, as is the fedora. I still have the suit (I got married in it), the white shirts, and the wheelie bag. The shoes wore out but had a nice story of their own before I found a pair of Turkish shoes to replace them.

I took a 'test run' with my gear before leaving the USA. I was presenting my research on electronic friendships at the American Anthropological Association's annual meeting in San Francisco. It was a good time to see if I'd forgotten anything I'd regret later.

Test Run

Putting on the suit, the hat, and then carrying my leather bag and nice carry on, I look like a G-man from a 1930's movie. The cab driver didn't know what to think. People don't dress like that in Hawaii where wearing shoes is considered dressy. The driver jumped out of his cab, opened the trunk, and didn't say anything until I spoke. Interesting.

"If you don't mind me asking, what do you do where you dress like that?"

I said. I'm an anthropologist."

"What does an anthropologist do?" He asked.

"We study people." I answered.

I had to come to terms with being odd and standing out. At the airport, he told me he was scared because the world had been alright with the less intelligent people out of work, but now smart people were losing their jobs and he expected all hell to break loose. He figured the smart ones would tear everything apart. I'm not sure why he told me that.

At the airport, my toothpaste tube was too large but the security guard let it pass. The flight was uneventful. The woman sitting next to me was petit, clean, and pleasant.

Arrived in SF and my buddy Jason met me. We smoked cigarettes and reminisced about the people and places we knew in the US Marine Corps. Why did all the guys I served with develop alcohol problems? All of us. And no relationship longer than five years.

Met up with my sister and her husband. She apologized for not inviting me to their house, but told me he didn't want me to stay with them. He made jokes about my family being small, called my dad a gnome and my brother a Jew. I didn't want to stay with him.

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

Ate a steak at John's Grill, the site of Daishal Hammett's Maltese Falcon. Had my tarot cards read by a professional. It was the same old bullshit, you have karma from a past life blocking your crown, heart, and sexual chakras and you need to have sound therapy and crystal healing to solve this problem. She needed to hit me up for so much information and then was way off and giving me incredibly ambiguous answers. Here is the gist: She saw a lot of travel in my future, safe travels, I haven't met my soul mate, but I would. The reason I have not is because in a past life I was a spiritual healer who turned my back on people who needed me to have an affair with a married woman who was my soul mate. In this life my chakras are blocked as a result and there are family battles going on. It was all generic and when she told me about the blockages and additional cleansing she could help me with, I lost interest. Total bullshit.

When I was leaving, a drunk in the hallway looked familiar. He said "Sometimes it pays to make them nervous, a little bit." I don't know what it meant, but more than the psychic bullshit.

This test run was successful. The baggage worked. I need jeans and t-shirts in the future because, there were times I wanted to be in casual mode and was unable to be because of my lack of clothes. I don't always want to wear these shoes, though they are comfortable. I am uncomfortable wearing shoes indoors. San Francisco has nice shoe shines.



VAGO DAMITIO

SURFING COUCHES IN HAWAII

Once again, I was sure I had the best idea ever. I was going to leave America behind and travel the world. I was going to blog about all my adventures and do anthropology on the web about the culture of travelers and couch surfers!

Before you laugh too hard at my plan which today sounds like the plans of a million other lazy losers who want to travel and make money – keep in mind this was 2008 and there weren't a million-gazillion 'travel blogs' like there are today. I had changed my domain from Fukn.us to TerrorSuspect.com but since that seemed like a stupid name to travel with I went with the ridiculously named ChrisDamitio.com.. I'd been writing snarky review articles about politics and space. My main themes were Kim Jong Il, Evil Clowns, Monkeys and Terrorists. People liked it. I was sure they would like it as much when I began to write about travel. I was wrong. My audience liked Kim Jong Il, Evil Clowns, Monkeys, and Terrorists. They didn't care much about travel.

I moved out of my apartment a month before graduation. During that time, I couch surfed with friends in Hawaii. Every couch I stayed on, I made a video and would ask 'the couch questions'. My plan was to couch surf around the world and do the same thing. It was actually a good plan, but I got sidetracked, as you shall see.

My travel plan was simple. A \$300 flight to the mainland, an Amtrak special (seven legs anywhere in the USA in 14 days) for \$440, and then from the East Coast a cheap flight to somewhere that wasn't in North America – probably Europe. That was the plan.

I'm big on personal symbolism, hence my choice on Oahu in the three days before I left was to stay at the hotel next to the hostel I had first stayed at in Waikiki. When I'd arrived with \$100, that hotel had been beyond my means.

Leaving Hawaii was hard. I still miss it. Every day, I miss Hawaii. It gave me a lot...more than the degree in Anthropology, it gave me

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND
something I had never had. Hawaii gave me a home.



This was my graduation cake. If the photo was color you would see that my friend Elaine made me a pussy cake before I set out to see what the world had to offer. The cake was delicious, if disturbing. This was just a few days before I left. It's hard to believe that was 2008 and now it's 2013 and I still haven't been able to make it back home. Soon enough, I hope.

VAGO DAMITIO

AMTRAK ACROSS THE USA

I left Hawaii on the 23rd of December, 2008. Portland and Seattle airports were closed down after 100-year snowstorms dropping three feet in 48 hours. Portland is a city that in recent memory had never seen much more than a dusting of snow. I was flying to Portland.

When I arrived at Honolulu International Airport, I found the biggest lines since the 9-11 days. I checked in online and it was impossible to find out what gate I was supposed to go to since my flight wasn't listed on the boards. Every flight out of Honolulu was canceled or delayed. Flights to Seattle were canceled and there were people lying on the ground in every possible place. I went through the invisible checkpoint to the far left and avoided the long lines at the center security checkpoint.

I needed to figure out where my flight was, since it still wasn't listed. A passing Hawaiian Airlines employee told me Portland flights were not canceled, but didn't know more than that. My flight number was 26 and there was a flight 1026 to Portland at a far gate so I decided to head there. It turns out my flight was delayed until 11 pm (it was 2pm) but the flight from the day before had been scheduled to go out at 2 pm. I requested to get on that flight and was put on standby, along with everyone else who was scheduled for my flight.

There were many grumpy people who had spent the previous day in limbo and still had nowhere to go. I was friendly to the desk agent and told him I knew it wasn't his fault and he was doing all he could. Maybe that made the difference. Maybe the suit helped...I was one of about ten people they put on the flight.

The pilots didn't know if we could land in Portland.. Everyone on the flight was nervous. As we took off the entire plane erupted in applause. We landed around 11 pm and once again the plane erupted in applause. We weren't applauding the food or entertainment, we were all happy to have made it safely.

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

Portland was cold and there was snow everywhere. My buddies Stephan picked me up in an old blue pickup.. When I woke at his house in the morning, there was a beautiful light snow covering everything, and it felt like Christmas. I stayed in Portland until the 28th - the day after my birthday.

I found it symbolic returning to Portland after my seven years in Hawaii. I was there on September 11th, 2001. It was the event which drove me to leave the mainland. In 2001, I'd seen people filled with rage and hate, then those damn American flags popped up everywhere, and everyone had been hell bent for revenge. Even in bleeding heart Portland. I watched angry motorists tear up signs I posted. "Enough have died, drop bread not bombs." That was when I got the hell out of North America without leaving the United States.

I returned to Portland as much more than I was when I left. And yes, the symbolism of a magical blanket of crunchy white snow wasn't lost on me. It felt like I'd come full circle even though I'd briefly been there in 2003 when I was sure I was going to live a happy stockbroker/flight attendant dream too.

It was my first white Christmas in a decade, but when it came time, I was glad to go. Portland isn't my kind of town. I had been excited to spend some time again at Powell's Books, the largest bookstore in the world, but when I exited my friend's car I had to step over a used syringe lying in a dirty snowbank and immediately was hit up for change by a guy who looked younger and at least as healthy as I was.

In less than a block we passed a half dozen panhandlers. I appreciated the guys playing music, but the sheer number of them prevented me from dropping a dollar. It's like dripping blood into a shark pool. If you show a moment's mercy or kindness, the energy vampires start in on you.

Portland is a city with a lot of beards, a lot of women with boy's haircuts, and a lot of down and out people. Everyone smokes in Portland and they smoke everywhere. Much of Portland is devoted to drinking. I've done my share of that. I don't like shooting pool or hanging out in bars. I revisited some of my old favorite haunts and found them to be less than appealing. The Triple Nickel in Southeast Portland is one of the skuzziest bars I've ever been in. I t always but I had changed.

The crisp white snow was soon replaced with dirty slush and my shoes needed a good shine from the salt on the roads. Portland has more restaurants per-capita than any other city in the United States. The prices are budget-friendly and the food is fantastic if you know where to look.

In Portland, I went to a Couchsurfing (the social travel site) meet-up. Couchsurfing turned out to be a great way to see the world and a great

VAGO DAMITIO

way to get laid. After all, if you me someone who you had already decided you were compatible with, you were in the same house, you were drinking together - yeah - Couchsurfing isn't a dating site, but it can be a shortcut to finding sex when you are on the road. Whether you like that truth or not, there it is.

Portland to Sacramento.

An hour after I boarded Amtrak, I sat in the sightseeing car watching the dark farm houses go by as the first light of day began to show. We passed what looked like a giant sinkhole in the Columbia River where water was dropping six feet lower than the surface of the river. It was like unexpected waterfall in the middle of a river. Almost perfectly round.

I ate trout and bad rice on a plastic plate for \$24 for dinner. The server looked like Wilford Brimley and I was forced to share a table with an insurance salesman from Tacoma, a psychiatrist, and his wife. They told me Amtrak routes across the Midwest were closed because of the storm of the century had blown in. I pointed out that the century was only eight years old and had plenty of time to do better.

I slept with my legs on the seat tray in front of me. A squalling baby in the cabin woke me and I put in ear plugs which is a bad idea if you are climbing over a mountain range. I woke with an earache because with the plugs in I was unable to equalize the pressure (pop the ears). The train was late by a half hour. My Couchsurfing host in Sacramento was a sweet girl. She worked as an interpreter for the deaf. She picked me up from the train station at 7 am with a steaming cup of coffee. I was a stranger being met like a friend. She took me back to the whore house.

She wasn't a whore. I asked if I could sleep with her, but she said no way. She lived in a house that used to be Sacramento's most popular brothel in the 1870's. Sacramento was a surprisingly fun place. Total generosity and good times. My host introduced me to the other residents of the whore house and we chilled out on their balcony and played guitars. In the evening we went out to a local watering hole and sang karaoke. I swear I didn't suggest it, nor did I put karaoke in the house in Portland or in my brother's house in Utah...it kept happening. This was a karaoke trip.

Californians favor the trucker mustache for the men rather than the full scraggly beard of Oregon. Few beards, lots of mustaches. Lots of hipsters, but not so full of themselves or preoccupied with their hipsterness as in Portland. Cleaner and less rainy than Portland. I liked Sacramento. The next day, I walked back to the Amtrak Station after

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND
regretfully saying goodbye to the whore house.

Sacramento to Salt Lake City.

The platform was crowded with people on their way to Reno. They were hitting the booze before noon. Leaving Sacramento it was foggy and cold. The train was more than an hour late. One of the older drinkers told me I had something white on my coat and proceeded to wipe it off. It was bird shit. She told me it was good luck to have a bird shit on you. I never knew that. Her breath smelled like malt liquor.

Boarding the train I was in a completely abandoned compartment. Soon, an exceedingly beautiful girl in a red coat sat across the aisle from me. I named her Agent 231, code name, Milk Maid. (Did I mention I like to play a game called 'secret agent' when I travel? I'm Agent 808. International man of mystery and romance.) We exchanged codewords and the secret agent handshake as we rode the train through some of the most beautifully rugged country I have ever seen.

Her cover story was that she was attending the Defense Language Institute in Monteray. She claimed to be in the US Navy and have three young daughters in Florida but I knew the truth about 'Milk Maid'. She was a black ops agent sent to give me my orders from Big Barry Obama. We arrived in Reno about sunset. Agent 231 went to sleep and I was approached by another secret agent. Codename 'Flowerchild'. Flowrchid asked me if I wanted to share a bottle of wine with her. On a drunken whim, I asked her if she wanted to go down to the toilet and shag. Much to my surprise, she said yes. Did you know Amtrak handicapped bathrooms have tiny plush couches in them? Very convenient when you are playing secret agent.

We arrived in Salt Lake City at 5 am. Bird shit really is lucky! It was the best train ride I've had. It may be impossible to ever top. Milk Maid was confused as Flowerchild kissed me goodbye. Spy work requires staying on your toes. No sleeping on the job.

My brother was living in Ogden and I spent three days hanging out with him, our cousins, and my mom who had come to visit. Ogden is a seedy town filled with bums and surrounded by some of the most beautiful mountains in the United States. Cool old brick buildings, rail cars, and snow-covered majestic peaks in every direction. Along with all those bums. From Ogden, I went back to Salt Lake City to continue my Amtrak and Couchsurfing adventures.

SLC to Chicago.

I almost took a hotel room in Salt Lake City but instead I used

VAGO DAMITIO

Couchsurfing to contact a beautiful girl who looked like a young Suzanne Sommers.. I set out from the downtown to find her place. It was cold and getting dark. I became lost and wandered onto the campus of the University of Utah. I ended up on a parkway heading out of town in the snow. I don't like to turn around, but this time, I backtracked a mile and then gave my beautiful host a call..

She and her friends picked me up and we went bowling. Straight from the road to the bowling alley. I'm a crap bowler, but I always enjoy throwing my balls in the gutter. When they picked me up, I had to pick my jaw up off the floor. My host and her friend were both movie star beautiful.

We'd all traveled a lot so there was plenty to talk about and many funny stories. After bowling we met a couple more couch surfers. A girl and a guy. He and I were doing similar train trips across the USA. He had the 45 day package and I was planning to head to Europe in a few days. He played the hand saw and sang a duet with the couchsurfing girl before we all went to The Tavernacle, Salt Lake City's oldest dueling piano bar. It was filled with more beautiful women. The people watching was bizarre and wondrous. The most outrageous and out of hand guys there were five Mormon guys who weren't drinking!

At 3:15 I hopped in a cab and left my most beautiful host without even sleeping on her couch. I caught my one and only on-time Amtrak train. Possibly it was the first and last Amtrak that was ever on time. I felt like I was really witnessing something special.

The guys in the dining car and the snack bar, Johnny and Mr. Curly, seemed in a celebratory mood and started making annoying announcements about breakfast and coffee about 5:30. They were funny, but I didn't want to hear them. It was too early and I'd slept only two hours and already had a hangover. That was when Agent 303 showed up. Agent 303 laughed at me when I walked barefoot into Johnny's snack shop and was chewed out for not wearing any shoes. Johnny had the conductor make an announcement to the entire train that shoes are required when walking around the train.

She informed me that the real enemy we had to look out for were the Agents TOIL. Toddlers of Indeterminate Longevity. Three mini-me's were running rampant on the train and pretending to shoot us. With the agents of TOIL about there was no chance of a repeat performance in the lavatory. Damn TOIL!

The trip to Chicago across the prairie was not fascinating and not filled with wonder. From Denver to Chicago there was not much to see. Agent 303 left outside of Denver. I had so much fun in Salt Lake City, I

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

forgot to confirm my couch in Chicago. My friend in Hawaii had given me the number of her friends in Chicago. It was hospitable of them to take me in on such short notice, but where Mary Jane had given me the keys to her house and told me to use her bicycle, they told me to leave their house at 6:30 the next morning when they went to work. Funny how a complete stranger was more trusting than someone I had a close friend in common with.

After two days on the train, I slept like a baby until they made me get up so we would leave their house together. It was bitterly cold in Chicago and I didn't know what to do so early. I sat in a coffee shop and then I visited the Chicago Institute of Art. I looked up at the Sears Tower shrouded in mist and decided to skip it since the view was going to be nothing but cloud. I walked through the downtown streets taking pictures and trying to get a feel for this magnificent city. You can't appreciate Chicago unless you get into the neighborhoods and it was my fault for not scheduling enough time to do that. I didn't go out to any Jazz bars but the architecture is astounding in the city that gave birth to the skyscraper. Overall, Chicago felt too cold and too fast for my tastes. I know, it was January, but I don't necessarily mean the temperature.

From the ground level, the recession was being felt. Buses and trains were fuller than ever according to the waitress in one coffee shop. People were riding public transport to save a few bucks on gas. Taxi drivers were losing their jobs. At the Gene Siskel Center and bought three sandwiches for the trip to Boston before catching my next train. Potbelly's Sandwiches might be the best I've ever had.

Chicago to Boston.

This was by far the worst train of them all. The dining car was filled with drunks. One particularly drunk fellow had to be escorted off the train by police because he was cussing and spitting at the train attendant. When other passengers tried to intervene, he spat and cursed at them too. The police came on the train at the next stop. He became docile and left with them. There was a backwoods type from Missouri who looked like he came from a family tree with no limbs. He sang loudly to himself while he stared out the window saying "Oh my gawd, there ain't no traffic like this in Missouri. Eight lanes!" It was fascinating and disturbing because it was real.

He asked to borrow several people's cell phones and tried to make friends with me. I didn't care to be his friend. You know how sometimes you know who someone is awful. Yeah, I knew. I had no chance to

VAGO DAMITIO

ignore the freak-show around me. It was fascinating if it hadn't felt threatening.

I was exhausted after not enough sleep the night before and walking around freezing Chicago all day. Admittedly not in the best mood of my trip. The gray sky, gray buildings, and leafless brown scenery didn't improve my mood. The trip to Boston from Chicago was drab and ugly. My mood was the same. When we arrived in Boston, I was relieved to see evergreens, warm brick buildings, colorful houses, and people who took the time to smile. South Station in Boston was the opposite of Union Station in Chicago. Union Station is a hole (literally a hole). Boston is above ground, friendly and visually interesting. It was like the difference between a greyhound station and a cruise ship terminal.

Another old Marine Corps buddy picked me up at South Station. We went for a midnight drive and he showed me the sights. His enthusiasm for Boston was contagious. I in love with the city after twenty minutes. The people on the sidewalks did a flat footed glide that I named 'the Boston Shuffle'. The reason? Slick ice coated every flat surface. Portland with two feet of Snow, Ogden had more, Chicago with bitter cold, but Boston won the prize for slick icy surfaces.

As I move east, the number of Dunkin Donuts stores grew in number. In Hawaii, Dunkin Donuts is the place where hookers congregate. On the East Coast they have great coffee and bagels instead of tired whores.

We visited the USS Constitution and climbed up Bunker Hill. We ate 'chowda' at The Warren Tavern.. It's where the initial meetings of the Revolutionary War took place. George Washington's wake was held there. It was Paul Revere's favorite bar. In the North End, we visited the North Church where Paul Revere hung the lantern to tell his comrades the Redcoats were coming. I met Ben Franklin in a tourist shopping area and took a picture with him. I love Ben Franklin.

There was no monument to the Boston Tea Party. It was the point where the colonials had decided enough was enough and rebelled against King George. No one is sure where it took place.

We left the city heading north to the graveyard Lowell, Massachusetts. An icy halo hovered three inches above the snow as we drove to section 94 to search for Jack Kerouac's grave. No one had visited the grave since the snow had fallen and it was covered with a foot of snow.

The marker was a flat stone flush with the surface of the ground and it wasn't visible. We kicked the ice and snow off the ground but never found it. We left couple of smokes in the vicinity and poured some whiskey for the dead old lush to suck up from the soil. It was our

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

'offering'. We were stomping and poking around on top of Kerouac's corpse and I was highly amused to piss 'On the Road' next to Kerouac's grave site. Somehow I knew the old drunk approved.

Back at my friend's place we played guitar's while walking through Marine Corps memories. We were hanging out with a crazy Midwest girl he'd brought along for kicks. We traveled down memory road to a weekend in 1992. As Lance Corporals, we bought and consumed 36 bottles of champagne over a 96 (three day weekend) while listening again and again to Social Distortion's version of Ball and Chain. Not surprisingly we were able to perform a guitar duet of the song which the Midwest chick sang along with...she had no idea why we insisted on drinking champagne.

Boston to Providence.

The trip from Boston to Providence was a half hour. The only thing I noticed from the train was some interesting graffiti with characters from the Bullwinkle and Rocky show on it. I needed a day or so to arrange for couch surfing, plan my route, and all that jazz while I was in Utah, but it never materialized. I'm glad the time went like it did, with family and new friends, but since catching that 3 am train in Salt Lake, everything has been more seat of the pants than I'd expected.

It's why I arrived in Chicago not knowing where to stay and why I had no couches arranged anywhere else. A big part of the problem was that crossing the United States by train takes time even without stopping to visit. The fourteen day USA Rail Pass didn't provide enough time for that since at least five of those days have to be spent on the train.

I found an old fashioned New England barbershop in Providence. Bob's Barbershop. Great haircut, nice guy. A Rhode Islander who has been cutting hair during the entire 37 years I'd been alive. It was the best haircut I ever had.. It was the first time a white guy cut my hair since I was a child. It makes sense a white guy understands white guy hair better than someone who isn't a white guy.

I hoped to meet up with one of my oldest friends in Providence. We rode the school bus together as kids. Back then, she lived in a tiny town called Ono. Her family lived in a geodesic dome Now, we met up at the biggest hotel in Providence. A few words about Providence are necessary here. Providence is one of the oldest towns in the United States and was founded to provide a haven for those suffering religious persecution. Providence has more coffee houses than anywhere I had ever been. There are colleges everywhere you look and the architecture is old and doesn't have the 'tourist restored' look. I liked Providence.

VAGO DAMITIO

My friend and her boyfriend insisted I come stay with them. They showed me Newport so I could see what real mansions look like. Good Gawd! Everything from the mansion where Arnold pops out of the ice in True Lies to The Breakers. We visited the Tennis Museum and ate Indian food. We picked up live lobsters and for dinner and had a surf and turf. You buy live lobsters by pulling them out of the water and dropping them live in a paper sack. Her boyfriend generously shucked the lobsters for us and so I was able to eat delicious ‘lazy man’ New England lobsters.

In the morning, we did a bit of New England snow shoveling in the driveway and then my friend drove me to the station. Providence with a couple of inches of snow before dawn is one of the prettiest sights I have seen

Providence to New York.

The Amtrak trip stopped being fun after Denver. The combination of trying to fit as much as possible into fourteen days of travel and sleeping badly on the train or couches was catching up with me. When you surf couches, you are sleeping in the community zone of a house. If there are three roommates and one is an early riser but another is a late night go to bedder, you stay awake as late as the one roommate and wake up with the early riser.

I also needed time and space to do my trip planning, blogging and other computer oriented tasks - so far, I hadn't done any of that. I hadn't had time! I reached Philadelphia on my last scheduled day of travel. I hadn't heard a positive response back from any hosts in Philly. I wanted to be in New York anyway. My main purpose in going to Philadelphia was to see where the United States began and pay homage to my hero, Benjamin Franklin. Possibly, the greatest man to ever live. Franklin started the public lending library, the US post office, invented the wood stove, and put into words some of the most powerful universal aphorisms not attributed to God or Shakespeare.

I visited the Liberty Bell and Independence Hall where the Declaration of Independence was signed. I visited Franklin Court and was disappointed with what the U. S. Park Service has done to honor Franklin. It was underground, cold, and not terribly interesting. I found Ben Franklin's grave and paid my respects. No whiskey, no pissing on the road. He would not have approved.

Then I went back to the train station and caught a train back to New York City. I checked into the Chelsea International Hostel on West 20th Street because I didn't have a host. I walked from Penn Station to the

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

hostel. I had a sense of safety as I walked through New York. It was safe, warm, and familiar. New York should be the capital of the United States. There are people of every shape, color, sexuality, religion, and nationality and they all live side by side. In New York City, I have a sense of security I never expected.

I walked to Times Square, ate a delicious slice of pizza, and drank a cup of coffee. Times Square is interesting but overdone. Maybe it's from living in Hawaii and having so much access to Waikiki, but I'm not impressed by Planet Hollywoods, Hard Rock Cafés, Ripley's, or any of the other big corporate boardwalk shows. The screens and signs light up Times Square like it's daytime at any time of the day. It's a disgusting tribute to capitalism and American waste. It's not why I love New York. I love New York because of the people. Humanity makes New York special, not Times Square..

Back at the hostel, one of my dorm-mates was Canadian. Let's call him 'Dickwad'. Canadians are generally quite likeable but Dickwad was not quite likable. Abrasive, rude, loud, and obnoxious. He was the Ugly Canadian yet he had enough charisma to pull a cute English girl into his bed (in the dorm) within about 45 minutes of meeting her. And, I have to admit, there was something about Dickwad that made me feel sympathy for him.

Dickwad said he was going to see Letterman. He offered to get me a ticket. He was sometimes nice, I think Dickwad really was nice underneath his 'dickwadness'. He got me the ticket and then when I went to go to sleep, I couldn't because Dickwad had his laptop speakers blasting as he watched a move on his bunk. It was midnight..

I did a 100 block walk the next morning. I fell in love with New York no matter what direction I go. I walked along the Hudson River, through Wall Street, visited Ground Zero, went to Chinatown and Little Italy, and visited the rather disappointing National Museum of the American Indian. There should be more to celebrate the people who had the continent stolen from them.

Back at the hostel, I woke Dickwad to see if he wanted to head up to the show with me. I regretted not going by myself almost instantly. He rubbed me the wrong way with his every word. He had no regard for older women, young kids, or anyone else with his foul mouth. He had no conception of other people's space. He had no conception of anything but himself, alone, on the planet satisfying his desires with complete and total abandon.

The Letterman Show was terrible. They rammed us all into a tiny lobby and a production assistant told us to laugh even if Dave wasn't

VAGO DAMITIO

funny. So many rules. No calling out, no hooting, and make sure you laugh. Fake laughter again and again. Dickwad and I were seated to the far side of the stage. Letterman wasn't funny. Billy Crystal wasn't funny either. The new judge on American Idol wasn't funny or interesting. Paul Schaeffer and the CBS Orchestra played a solid set and then we were shuffled out the door so they could tape another show.

Dickwad was unflushable. I said I was going to walk when decided to take the subway, but he decided to walk with me instead. I wanted to ditch him, but still there was a part of me that felt bad abandoning this tiny prick in the city by himself. We met up with eight beautiful Swedish girls at the hostel. Eight- Beautiful- Swedish Girls – in New York City. Dickwad single handedly made them all close their legs tighter than a vice. I suggested we go to a bar where the cast of Saturday Night Live was rumored to hang out. The Swedes were into it. Everyone agreed it was a good idea. The English girl (who Dickwad now ignored because he was aggressively chasing the Swedes) didn't want to go and seemed relieved I was taking the Swedes away from Dickwad. Of course, Dickwad wasn't missing this. He came, the (now sad and grumpy) English girl came, a sodden old Aussie woman came, and the Swedish bikini team came. I still hoped the night might turn out to be fun.

The rejected English girl was soon hammered and began arguing with the Swedes and calling them all cunts. Dickwad was literally begging any of the Swedes for “a kiss, a hug, anything” and then joined the English girl in calling them bitches, whores, and cunts. Then he would turn to me and say “I'm going to fuck them all” - not a whisper, mind you. Within their hearing. The old Aussie said she'd had enough and left, I moved to the bar and made friends with a New York girl who cussed like a sailor and looked like a princess. Just my type.

I returned to the hostel at 4 am. I found Dickwad trying to use his jimmy open the Swedish girls dorm room with a credit card. Jesus. What a fucking embarrassment. I dragged him to our dorm and though it was around 4am, he flipped on the light without any consideration for the two guys sleeping. He talked loudly, woke the sleepers, and acted obnoxious. I shut off the light.

He then got up from his bed and said “I'm going to go get that English bitch and fuck her.” I figured he'd blown his chances with her when he started chasing the Swedes. She was probably long off in the land of sleep. Much to my surprise, a few minutes later he brought the sleepy-eyed drunk English girl to the dorm and loudly fucked her. I put in my earplugs and went to sleep.

I can't imagine how any woman ever fucked this guy. It proves I

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

don't know anything about women. We all woke up at 8 am thanks to Dickwad's alarm, which didn't wake him. He was supposed to check out at ten am and fly to Europe. I thought it was better to let him sleep. Hopefully our paths will never cross again.



There's a funny story associated with this picture. When I came to Morocco, this was my couchsurfing photo. Dickwad was actually the Photographer it was taken at Planet Hollywood in Times Square. Anyway, when I requested a couch in Morocco at Hanane's house, she and her sister thought I was the guy on the left. Turn's out they'd never seen Rocky and us white dudes look like statues anyway. She said to her sister "Look how muscular this couchsurfer is" I think they were disappointed when they found out I was the real human being who was being knocked out by Rocky.

VAGO DAMITIO

ESCAPING TO EUROPE

I found a round trip flight to Barcelona for \$500. One way fares were \$650. I left with no intention of coming back again and knew my return ticket was never going to be used. I'd been to England but this was my first trip to mainland Europe. This is from my journal on January 27, 2009.

Two months 'on the road'. From Honolulu to Portland to Sacramento to Salt Lake City to Ogden, back to Salt Lake City to Chicago by way of Denver to Boston to Providence to Philly to New York City to Barcelona to Valencia and now in Alicante.

I started with \$6000 and what I am certain of is I have spent too much. I have \$4000 left. I spent about \$350 on accommodation, food, and entertainment in New York City, paid \$500 for my ticket to Spain, and then spent \$700 during a week in Barcelona. It was an orgy of delight. I ate like a king, drank like a fish, and did everything I wanted to. Is it possible I spent that much?

I made friends from Barcelona, Rome, Milan, and France where I didn't know anyone before. I had random sex in European cities after partying until 7 am. I enjoyed Catalan culture and food, I stayed in Spanish homes and ate meals. I strolled in world famous parks with beautiful women, visited iconic museums, and gazed upon famous architecture. My Spanish and Italian went from none to some. Good value for \$700 but still – I've spent too much.

Spain is remarkable. The bars don't start happening until midnight. From noon to five pm, everything is closed. As I traveled from East to West I saw California everywhere I looked but instead of adobe missions, I saw huge stone castles and giant apartments built around narrow lanes. The water of the Mediterranean is the same electric blue as the water in the Philippines. The craggy mountains and yellow stone of the brightly painted houses on rocky ground excited me. The nation cobbled together

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

from many tribes: Catalan, Valencian, Basque, and Spanish. All part of this country that discovered the new world, made horrific first contact, and then proceeded to dominate, decimate, and reshape the cultures there.

From the gypsies I saw playing accordion and fiddle on the train, to the musician/beggars who stand guard with palms out in front of the churches, to the celebration of South American dance I wandered upon my first night in Valencia, there is a vibrancy to Spain that is best summed up by the concept of memento mori. The idea of something to remind one death is not as far away as one may think. I can see this idea in the works of Picasso, Gaudi, and Miro. I see it in the way my Spanish friends live their lives. There is a feeling that one must spend the last dollar, catch the siesta now, or love the woman of your dreams in this moment because tomorrow might be taken from you at any time. This is what most resonates with me in Spain. This idea of carpe diem and living the present moment to the fullest.

I found myself in the middle of an extraordinary life in Spain but I had a very naive concept of how expensive it is to travel in Europe. Check out this unbelievable bucket list and budget from my journal.

I should be able to survive in Europe on 20 Euros a day. That gives me 200 days, I need to figure out how to move about cheaper and this is the biggest problem. I suppose I could walk through Europe in a suit with a hat. Pulling my wheelie bag behind me and eating fruit as I go, couch surfing, and living rough. This has a certain appeal and spring is right around the corner.

Here is what I want to do.

Go to Granada and see Alhambra. Go to Gibraltar. Go to Seville, Portugal, San Sebastian, Madrid, Biarritz, Paris, Brussels, Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Berlin, Munich, Luxembourg, Strasbourg, Switzerland, Antibes, Milan, Genoa, Pisa, Rome, Naples, Sicily, Malta, Athens, Istanbul and then to go to Korea

I'm amazed I believed I could survive 200 days in Europe on 20 Euro a day. Of course, here I am writing this four years later and guess what? I did do most of what I wanted to do... but not quite how I expected to. From the above bucket list, I've only missed Strasbourg, Antibes, Athens, Sicily, and Naples. I've been to more than a hundred other places that aren't on the list. It generally has cost more than 20 Euro a day though.

VAGO DAMITIO

LOSING THE THREAD

I was finding my groove as I found my way to Granada.

Life is good. I'm in Europe, making friends, getting laid, and accomplishing something...seeing the world anyway. It's such an odd thing to arrive in a strange city where I barely speak the language and start wandering around dark streets. I love it. I love Spain. So different from the United States. I threw away my guidebook. Arriving in Granada, I stepped off the bus and started looking for a hotel. I make friends every day, even when I'm not trying.

After two months on the road – even though it was wonderful. I was already tired and thinking of settling down somewhere. Having a rest. I'd forgotten my real reason for leaving was to find a better place to live. Granada was the best I'd come across.

For the past few days I've been staying in the flat of three lovely Spanish artists. They've taken me in and allowed me to be a temporary roommate. We have caroused the tapas bars, wandered the streets, hiked in the Sierra Nevada and tonight I will cook dinner for the girls and their friends. I can't make poi and they might be disappointed with Spam, eggs and rice, I'm going to make sweet and sour pork and pineapple. I met a nice English girl in a bar called Poe (said poi). Today we ate kabobs at Moroccan restaurant called Baraka. We drank tea in a nice Moroccan tea house. Morocco is so close. Africa is so close. We browsed books in a used shop. She wants to explore a free sexual relationships. I'm open to trying. She is vegan (though not militant). She asked me to stay in Granada, but at the moment, I think I need to head to Morocco.

Looking back, I can see it clearly. I was lonely and tired of the road

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

already. I wanted a home. It was being offered to me in Granada. I chose to ignore the offer and keep to my rather ambitious plan to see the entire world. I boarded a bus to La Linea Conception, Spain – the border town at Gibraltar.

The bus driver was blustery and the worst driver I'd seen in Spain, with the exception of a woman I saw going the wrong way down a one way street in Barcelona. He constantly shook his fist and yelled at people as the bus lurched and stalled. He was firm in the belief they were the ones at fault. It was a jarring ride with lots of stops. His wife rode in the front jump seat. Her large buttocks barely fit in her too tight denims, butt (with two t's for obvious reason) she provided a sweet example of Spanish life as she shook her fist at drivers while riding next to her husband. She was a funny contrast to the terror his driving inspired in me.

Once in La Linea Conception, I ordered a Hawaiian pizza from an Indian restaurant where a kiwi dressed like a cowboy was talking with the owner who spoke English like an American but looked like a Sikh. It tasted like Indian spices. Cowboys and Indians.

It was too late to go to Gibraltar. I found a cheap room and in the morning walked across the border for a badly cooked 'American breakfast' of ham, eggs, and hash browns. Why is it the English make everything taste so bad? I withdrew 30 Gibraltar pounds from the ATM and breakfast set me back about 6. Customs was minimal. I put my bags through an x ray and they checked I had a passport.

Gibraltar is a semi-tropical England. Lots of birds of paradise. The tram up the rock of Gibraltar was worth the \$10 it cost. The rock is spectacular. At the top I had an encounter with some of the Macaques (Barbary Apes), as one of them unzipped an empty pocket in my suitcase while I wasn't looking and when I turned, his hand was deep in it. Blasted little thief. He hooted at me and puffed up his cheeks but I shooed him away without getting bitten. The apes of Gibraltar bite 400 people a year.

Legend has it Hercules separated Morocco and Spain and then inscribed "Non plus ultra" meaning "Nothing beyond here" on the stone. After Columbus made contact with North America the Spanish added 'plus ultra' on their flag meaning 'more beyond.' In its history Gibraltar has been sieged fifteen times and never taken. The citizens are a mix of Spanish and English who speak a form of English that sounds more like Spanish. The British have had control of Gibraltar since 1713 when the Treaty of Utrecht gave it to them from Spain for perpetuity. The Spanish want it back but the Gibraltaranos like being part of Britain, as evidenced

VAGO DAMITIO

by the many red phone booths, double deck tourist buses, and fish and chips shops.

1200 feet above sea level and one can see in all directions as the ships of many nations make their way into and out of the Med. It is the meeting point of Africa and Europe, the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. 30,000 inhabitants crowd into 6 square miles. As to the Macaques, there are so many they have to be culled. They regularly cause problems for the people of the town. They are the only non-human primate in the Mediterranean region. No one knows how they found their way across the water from Africa. Gibraltar is a cultural island but, geographically it is a peninsula. That's why I was able to walk in and then out.

Back to the La Linea bus station and I took a bus to Tarifa. I was accustomed to big Spanish metro stations and I missed the tiny stop next to a gas station. The driver wouldn't let me out until the next stop. It was many miles in the middle of nowhere. Around me were cows and the beauty of Andalusia. With no bus in sight I pulled out my black marker and wrote Tarifa on a flat slab of marble that looked like it had once been in some Moorish fortress. "Tarifa, por favor." My thumb was out.

Hitch hiking is pointless in Spain. Drivers waved or gestured in the direction I was going but no one stopped. Finally, after several hours, another bus came. I made it back to Tarifa without missing the stop a second time.

During winter in Tarifa, most guest houses are closed. Those that were open were full with people bound for Morocco. I was there to see the "Hawaii of the Mediterranean" but it was the wrong time of the year. I wasn't ready to go to Morocco yet. I'd barely seen Spain. I didn't find a room to sleep in. I found a ferry ticket to Morocco as the sun was starting to set. I knew it was a bad idea, but I did it anyway.



SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

THE LURE OF THE ORIENTAL – THE MAGHREB

I'm not sure what brought me to Morocco. Morocco wasn't even on my list! Like most people in the US, I was confused between Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco. Sometimes I made the Monaco - Morocco error. Yes, I thought Morocco was where the famous Grand-prix race was held. I thought Monaco was an Arab nation. I definitely couldn't tell you the shape of either country in the days before I came here (Yes, here not there. As I write this four years later in 2013, I'm still here.)

I had a fascination with Arab music and culture. It was all those minor chords and the geometric shape of the art. I always had a thing for brunettes with big almond shaped eyes and skin the color of a cafe au lait. I liked hummus and feta cheese, found the idea of harems to be attractive in an orientalist way most men of the West share, and I found women who were forbidden twice as desirable as those I could have. None of that made me want to go to Morocco. It made me want to go to Turkey, Egypt, and the rest of the exotic world of the Middle East.

A classmate from Arabic class at the University of Hawaii had gone to Morocco. He returned from vacation filled with stories.. He brought back stories of the wonderful food and rich culture. He had amazing photos. Morocco, by the way, is one of the most photogenic countries on the planet. In Spain, I kept meeting people who told me "You have to go to Morocco. It's the most amazing place I've ever been."

An email from my former boss at the limo company said "Go to Morocco since you are in Spain. Skip Tangier and go straight to Fez. It's the heart of the country. Marrakech is a fucking circus. You'll love it."

In Valencia, Alicante, Barcelona, and everywhere else, I kept meeting people who told me I had to go to Morocco. Did I have to listen? No, I didn't. Still I wanted to see how my two years of university Arabic would do. In Granada, I met this Polish expat hippie and smoked a big doobie with him. He told me about his stoned and whacked out exotic

VAGO DAMITIO

adventures in Morocco.

"Go to Fez," he told me. "Fuck Tangier, it's a pit. I was robbed there."

Aside from looking at a world map and figuring out where Morocco actually was, that was about all I knew before I boarded the ferry. I didn't bother to see where the cities were - which, by the way, would have been helpful because I might have known Tangier is a long ways from Fez. I might have figured out that taking a train at 9 pm meant arriving in the wee hours of the morning. I might gotten a hotel when I arrived instead of taking a limousine executive's and a stoned Pollack's advice about skipping Tangier and going straight to Fez.

Because it turns out, there are a lot of fascinating places between Tangier and Fez. Tangier isn't bad either as long as you don't put yourself in situations where you are going to get robbed. In fact, I found out later that Tangier is a fun city. But not that day.

Yeah, I went to Morocco with a solid academic understanding of Islam, a little Modern Standard Arabic, and no knowledge about Moroccans, Morocco, Berbers, the Maghreb, the music, the culture, or the couscous. Nothing, nada, zero or in Arabic sifr - in Moroccan Arabic - called Darija - it's walu. Nothing.



SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

FROM THE INTERZONE TO ENGAGEMENT

I arrived in Tangier, caught a train to Fez, and arrived at 3 am. I was sleepless, exhausted, and picked up by some touts who eventually put me to sleep in a guesthouse we broke into. I was the only one there. It was closed for repairs.

I escaped the next day and found a budget-friendly hotel where I paid to get my laundry washed. Washed not dried. A few hours later, the coldest, heaviest storm in twenty years arrived. Nobody bothered to take my clothes off the line on the roof before the rain hit. Everything I had was soaked. I bought a camel hair blanket but continued to freeze in the hotel because it didn't have heat. I was staying in near Bab Boujloud. I sent out dozens of Couchsurfing requests, finally, a Couchsurfing host responded.

To make a long story short, I was stranded at her house for nine days while I waited for my laundry to dry and the roads to re-open from flooding. A year later we were married. Four years later we have a daughter and I'm still in Sefrou as I write this. If you want the long version, you should read *Not My Morocco*. There is no dating in Muslim countries. If I wanted to get to know her further than nine days allowed, I had to ask her to marry me. It was a situation of all or nothing. I insisted on a one year engagement so we would both have time to change our minds. Here's what I wrote when I was still considering an escape:

And that brings up intention. I'm bored exploring the world alone, I wish I had a woman with me. However, it is harder to make new friends when you are traveling with a woman, and you tend to become an insular bubble. Maybe the solution is to do a Paul Theroux and travel without the woman sometimes. My intention...I don't know. I've limited funds. I could travel for a few more months, get a job in Korea or Japan, work for a year, etc. I could get married, figure out how to make some money, default on my loans for a while more. My intentions might change. Hers might too. She is everything I dreamed of, though the pain in the ass of her being Moroccan and having to go through ten thousand miles of red

VAGO DAMITIO

tape to marry and travel with her are not a part of my dream.

I asked her to marry me. She said yes. We were engaged. In Morocco situations are never as simple as that. The next day I had to go shopping with her, her mom and her sisters to buy a wedding ring. For some reason, this all seemed familiar. I was frustrated this couldn't be a secret engagement. Between us, but it makes sense in that by the participation of the family, I was forced to be more committed.

We went to buy a wedding ring. And by we, I mean me, my bride to be, her mother, plus her older sister. We also needed to buy dates for the engagement party. Oh yes, there was a party. I planned to ask her father for permission to marry her. I was making dinner and I needed to buy ingredients. I understood from her that was when the announcement would be made to her whole family. Actually, they all knew from the get go. Sometimes I think I was the last one anyone told.

The ring cost more than I had expected, then there were the other necessities I had to buy for the party. The dress, the slippers, the new hijab, the dates, and the chicken...the same price as a ticket to Portugal. I started to regret asking her. It's hard enough to shop and bargain without them trying to help, but I'm convinced the price we pay together is more than I would pay by myself . It's also more than they would pay without me. My ring was \$12. It was a simple silver band. It was odd to see it on my hand. I became grumpy. I was sleepy. I hate shopping and in Morocco one thing leads to another and another and another....it's why nothing ever gets completed here I'm sure of it, it's cultural chaos that keeps the garbage on the street, keeps the streets in a state of disrepair, and keeps the houses half way built even years after they are inhabited. Moroccans can't focus on just one thing.

I was barely able to get her father's attention away from the TV to ask for his daughters hand. I tried to make a speech but he moved his hand and nodded his head and gave his assent. My speech was eloquent and all about love and hearts, soul-mates, and the stuff you're supposed to say to the father when you ask permission to marry his daughter. The stuff you're supposed to say in Western culture. Later, my wife revealed she hadn't translated what I said. "He doesn't understand all that stuff. He's a shepherd. I just told him you wanted to marry me and you were a Muslim."

After that we ate the pizza I made. Except for her dad, who was unable to eat the crispy crust because he doesn't have teeth. I was clueless about how this engagement thing works in Morocco and as the party approached the next evening, I asked if I should put on a suit coat or something. My wife told me I didn't need to and so I continued to help

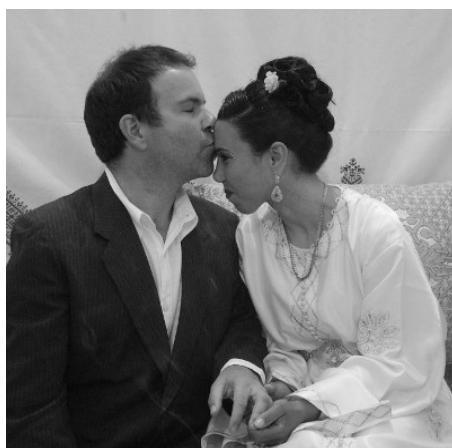
SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

her father clean the sheep pen. Family and friends arrived and when I went inside, all the women were wearing fancy gowns and my fiancee was looking like an Arabian princess. She was beautiful with rhinestones on her eyes, meticulous makeup, the sparkling white gown, and her hair done in an exquisite fashion.

I had sheep shit on my Italian leather shoes and hadn't combed my hair. I quickly brushed off my shoes and changed into my suit. I forgot to brush my hair. They didn't have a mirror.

We ate and danced. She and I sat in the end of the salon (which they call the saloon and which I find enjoyable enough to not correct them on) and they brought a tray with the rings, two bowls of milk, dates, candles, and several incense sticks stuck in a tomato. We put the rings on each others hands, fed each other dates, fed each other milk from the bowls, and then I kissed her forehead. After this there was food, dancing, and singing. My wife had henna put on her hands and feet for about two hours and then they put a dab on my right palm. She waited for the Henna to dry while the rest of us danced and sang. My video camera caught much of it, though the hijabbed old aunts and her sister tended to hold it sideways. I don't know why. A few male cousins came and they danced and smiled.

And that was it. We were engaged with the ceremony and the commitment and her wearing the henna and the rings - it was a public engagement and I was committed at that point. Maybe we should both have both been committed at that point because it was absolutely insane.



VAGO DAMITIO

ESCAPING TO EUROPE AGAIN – MY LAST HURRAH

Here is one of the best journal entries I've ever written:

Last night all the men were gone and I was serenaded by all the Arab women. They sang traditional Arab and Berber songs. They drummed. They danced. This is the stuff dreams are made of. A lone man arrives in a country and is serenaded by a mother and three cute dancing daughters in their twenties. Shimy-shammy belly dancy. My fiancee is a mysteriously exciting woman. Having her sing to me with her sisters keeping harmony and rhythm was a dream. Except it was real. They fed me dates, figs, oranges, and kisses. All the day is mine to do with what I want and while I am frustrated by their inability to understand my terrible Arabic and ability to communicate, it is improving.

I should point out that my fiancee was an English teacher. She spoke perfect English with an American accent. There were problems, though. My betrothed wasn't exactly receptive to discussing the philosophical aspects of this life and reality I love. Her reality was and still is rooted in the Qur'an and Islam. Her mind is nimble and flexible but she doesn't give herself room to move from the dogma of her faith. Her mind is closed to possibilities and her faith and background make her judgmental about many things I love.

I wanted to go to France and drink too much wine. I wanted to visit vineyards. I wanted to explore Hinduism in India and Buddhism in Nepal and Japan. I didn't think I could do these activities with her. Maybe the answer was to marry her, keep her in Morocco, and to go off on my own adventures without her. I needed to leave and get my head together. Maybe I wouldn't come back.

I took a petit taxi to the grand taxi stand. I took a grand taxi to Fez.

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

From Fez I took a train to Tangier. In Tangier I took the ferry to Tarifa and found a cold room in an empty hostel. I sat in a Spanish bar and drank wine while eating a bad Spanish pizza. I took a bus to Seville checked into another hostel where I drank beers and figured out what to do next. I wandered around the city for a day then caught a bus to Lisbon. On the bus I met two sexy Mexican girls from California (they were Mexican, not American or I would have said so) traveling with their overweight ambiguously gay tattooed and pierced wannabe-pirate friend. The three welcomed me as their traveling companion.

Since I didn't have a hostel lined up, I was happy to join them wherever they went. We stayed in a pretentious hostel, but Lisbon was magnificent. My new friends and I bought some bad weed and sat next to a sewer pipe where turds ejected into the ocean - it may not sound pleasant, but the laughter came when we recognized what it was. They were funny and stoned the whole time I knew them.

I was sad after Lisbon when they were heading to Morocco and I was heading away from it. I took a bus to Porto where I rented a private room, double bed, cable TV, and a stunning view of Porto for 20 Euros. As I sat watching the National Geographic Channel in my room and working on the computer, I felt incredibly content.

The women in Porto were exactly my type - not that I was looking. I could live there based on that alone. I ate a dinner of grapes and drank most of a bottle of port. The next morning I had an email from one of my kayaking friends from Hawaii. He sent me a job offer in Alaska.. I had to be there by May 1, but the money meant a chance to pay off some my student loans and would give me the chance to gather all the paperwork I needed to get married when (and if) I went back to Morocco.

The job paid \$15,000 which was less than half of what I owed, but it represented a nice start. But would I manage to find myself back to this part of this world in time to make a life with my fiancee? Would I meet someone else? Would I marry some other girl? Some non-Muslim girl with a better passport that allowed for easier travel and a better life together?

My next stop was San Sebastian in Spain. I took a night train and wasn't too uncomfortable except for the crazy French woman I shared a cabin with who insisted on talking to me despite my inability to understand her. She woke me a few times but I managed to sleep through the night and woke to her rubbing me. I had to shoo her away but it saved on a night of paying for a room.

San Sebastian is beautiful. I love the Basque country. The problem was the rain. It wasn't a place to explore in the rain, so I caught a train to

VAGO DAMITIO

Hendaye and from there to Biarritz. I didn't know I'd entered France until it hit me all the signs in Hendaye were in French. It should have been obvious, but I expected some sign which said, "Welcome to France". There wasn't one.

The prices in France were double those of Spain, triple those of Portugal and four times those of Morocco. In Biarritz, it was pouring rain too. The only hostel was full. I went to Bordeaux next and hoped to find something there. My refusal to plan ahead was getting me in trouble. but without a fat bank account, I was left in a liminal traveler's state. The liminal state is quite nice when the weather is good. It sucks when it's raining. I was rushing from place to place to see which places were worth more time in the future. Or so I told myself.

In France, I stayed with a remarkably interesting woman who I'd become friends with on message boards after the publication of Rough Living in 2003. She was a wild old red-head who had been in love with William S. Burroughs and made it her mission to carry on his work and philosophy when he died. The beat poet, philosopher, junkie, wife killer and gutter-punk guru was also a hero of mine. She lived in a small French countryside town and over the few days I was there she filled my head with the importance of Burroughs' work against control systems, psychological deconstruction, cut ups, and 'the machine' which Burroughs and his compatriot, Brion Gysin built which brought you into a higher state of awareness.

She had spent considerable time with both men and I tried to imagine what life had been like for this flame haired vixen when she wasn't pushing seventy, but was a gorgeous woman in her teens and twenties - heading to Tangier, New York, Paris, and London to fight against the mind control of 'the man'. I'm certain if she ever does write a biography it will be filled to the brim with stories that will make me blush and reconsider everything I know. She continues her work, publishing a newsletter dedicated to Burroughs and his work, writing books about control systems, and organizing international alternative thinking collectives.

The unfortunate thing about people who embrace these kinds of alternative ideas is often they bring in the bad with the good. Like my friends who listened to too much Art Bell back in the 1990s and then began watching the sky for 'contrails' and talking about how the CIA was spying on them with 'remote viewing'. She told me stories about the crazy people she had met and their rampant paranoia, sick use of manipulation, and crazy schemes. She sat me in front of the dream machine and played an old record of Burroughs reading about Hasan I

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

Sabah, the old man of the mountains, master of the Hashishian Assaasins. We rapped for hours about life, reality, and plenty of unreality. And, sadly, she also told me plenty about the conspiracies against her, shared her rather extreme paranoia, and took me to visit her ex-husband who seemed relieved to have escaped such things in his beautiful French countryside home.

It was during this visit I learned Kerouac, Burroughs and many other writers I admired had spent time in Morocco - especially in Tangiers. Funny I'd left the US after visiting Kerouac's grave, been drawn to Morocco (especially, Tangiers which I later enjoyed delving into) and now was looking into a dream machine in the house of a woman who had known them all.

From France I traveled to Rotterdam and then to Brussels where I became instant best friends with a fellow vagabond named Raif. From Charleroi I flew to Bergamo and from there back to Morocco. I think I knew I'd go back when I left. I loved her.

Back in Morocco I took the job in Alaska and hoped to make enough to start our life together. I wanted to pay my student loans. I just didn't know how to. I told my fiancee my plan and she agreed. At least, I think she did. The truth was, I've learned that she never told me what she really thought because as the man, it was my decision to make. I explained things to her as a partner so that we could make the decision together and she agreed with me. Not because she agreed with me, but (I think) because she was scared to disagree because I might cancel the marriage. There is no word in Arabic for compromise. I didn't learn that at the University of Hawaii.



VAGO DAMITIO

CANADIAN CUSTOMS AND DISCOURTESY

New York is a lonely city when you find yourself there unexpectedly and without money to spend. The cheapest flight from Europe was a puddle jump to New York City from Ireland. It was four times as much to fly from Morocco. I caught a budget flight to Spain, took a RyanAir flight to Germany, and then another RyanAir flight to Dublin. That cost about \$100 and my round trip flight to the US was another \$550. I needed to get to Alaska and the kayaking job by May 1st but I was nearly out of money.

No problem. I would cross the entire country of Canada by thumb and then hitchhike through the Yukon to Alaska. The job that would save me. I could have gone across the USA, but hitching is the USA isn't safe so I went North to Maine where I planned to cross into Canada. On the bus to Maine, I sat next to a Jewish girl who handed me her phone number without my asking. At the same time, she managed to disdain me for riding Greyhound, though we were both on the same bus. Her number stayed on the bus when I got off.

I'd always wanted to visit the other Portland - and guess what? There I was. I stayed with two 23-year-old girls. One was beautiful but she worked hard to be a manly lesbian. Brash, funny, and socially awkward. Her roommate was a skinny, animated girl with child bearing hips and big full breasts. I found myself attracted to those wide hips, unusual for me. I met up with her at the restaurant she worked at so she could decide whether to let me surf her couch. A smart move. I passed the test.

Everyone in Portland, Maine reminded me of someone in Bellingham, even the city of Portland is a lot like Bellingham. That's not fair, Portland might be better. Hard to say in one day. It had gotten cold. Portland is filled with funky bookshops, boats, quirky cafes, and plenty of people who fit into that scene. Of course, everyone sleeps with the windows open even when it's freezing. They're Mainers. Not too different than Northwesterners .

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

My Maine experience was good. I bought an LL Bean coat for \$3 at a garage sale. I splurged and bought a lobster for dinner since I was in Maine. I must have gotten a bad one because it tasted like halibut. My visit to Maine meant I'd been to every US state except for Vermont and that count included both Guam and Puerto Rico. I'm saving Vermont and American Samoa for later. In the morning when I walked outside the residents of the girl's neighborhood were throwing a party in the streets because they love living there. One guy had filled his pickup bed with beer and ice... and everyone else joined in. Guess what? No cordoned off area, no cops, people enjoying a beautiful day.

Even so, I was glad to be leaving the USA as I boarded on a CAT Superferry going from Portland, Maine to Yarmouth, Nova Scotia. I felt great until the old white lady at Canadian customs violated me. She read my journal, checked my sunglasses for powder, looked in my books for drugs, and opened everything that could be opened. I was surprised when she didn't cut open my new jacket to see what was inside. Somehow she missed the valium and darzipan my host in Ireland had given me. They weren't hidden. The customs agent was intent on busting me. When I asked her to please not read my diary, she said "Why? Is there something in here you don't want us to know?"

"It's because it's my diary." She raised her eyebrows and proceeded to rip open my sealed college transcripts after she'd finished reading my personal thoughts. In her searching, she missed the fact I had a USB hidden inside of a paperback book I'd carved the pages from. So I showed her. I opened it up when she said I could go and said "Oh, don't you want to search through my secret hiding place too? Wouldn't you like to steal copies of my books from my USB stick?" She was completely pissed off. It was a stupid mistake to taunt a customs agent.

She ran the USB through a computer to see if it contained child pornography or terrorist notes. Of course, it didn't. Then she took drug wipes and began testing the book to see if it contained drug residue. If you've already read the tips section of this book, you can guess what happened. I smiled and enjoyed myself until suddenly she began to smile. "Gotcha," she said, "Your book tested positive for heroin." I was fucked.

I was hustled into a secure room while she called her superiors to let them know what she'd found. I was stunned. I'd bought a cheap novel at the garage sale the day before, cut out the pages, duct taped them together, and that was that. That fucking book had heroin in it!

A stern man arrived and out the window, I saw him having an intense discussion with the woman who had busted me. He came to the holding

VAGO DAMITIO

cell, opened the door and told me "You can go. My apologies for the inconvenience. My colleague was unaware duct tape gives a false positive for heroin. You are free to go and welcome to Canada."

My new Canadian host, was waiting outside the ferry terminal for me. She was a roving reporter for the Yarmouth News and over the next few days she took me along on her rounds as she combed the islands for anything that was worthy of print. Along the way, I saw how laid back and nice life is on the islands of Nova Scotia. We visited schools, county council meetings, old gardeners, and the UFO museum. There are strange happenings in the night sky above Nova Scotia but it turns out at least one of the mayors makes a delicious blueberry crumble cake!

Hanging out with her was a lot of fun. She took me on bike rides and we had a fire on the night I arrived. We ate delicious food she made on it. One of her tenants was a nice Muslim man from Guinea. He was the only black person I had seen since coming to Nova Scotia and he told me he is the only Muslim within about 200 km. That must make fasting during Ramadan incredibly difficult.

When I left Yarmouth, my host packed me a lunch and gave me a beautiful cardboard sign that said "Nice Guy" on one side and "Brier Island" on the other. From Yarmouth, I hitched an odd solo route to Brier Island. From there I went onward to Digby and Halifax. Hitching along the way, I made met a girl from New Brunswick who told me I should come stay with her and never leave. I was tempted but May 1st was coming fast.

Halifax is a nice city. I met a girl in one of the oldest bars in Halifax. Within a short time, I was invited to surf her couch. She was a pasty white girl with tiny titties in a push up bra and a voice that hurt my head. She was nice and we laughed a lot in our time together but that voice was a killer. She was dating, a mama's boy Jew who constantly complained she was a goy. I'm assuming she didn't tell him she'd invited some guy from the bar to come stay at her house for a few days or call him a mama's boy Jew to his face. The bar we met in, The Split Crow has been serving drinks since July 17th 1749. 250 years. That's an old bar by North American standards.

I hadn't had any further word about the kayaking job. When I tried to use my ATM card, my bank froze my account. They hadn't known I was in Canada. It was the last money I had access to. I was broke in Canada. I had \$17 when I left Halifax. The violation by customs had scarred me. Having that old white bitch treat me like a criminal, feeling my underwear, reading my journal- it filled me with anger and disgust. It was a form of rape. Mental rape.

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

I wanted to sit ,work, build, laugh, and do some travel from time to time with my woman. Maybe we would move to Indonesia, Turkey, or Brazil. I was burning out on travel for travel's sake.

The rides from Halifax to Quebec City were interesting by the fact they displayed no interest in talking to me. I was out of cash and couldn't convince my bank to let me access my money. They wanted me to fax them a utility bill with my name on it. No such thing existed.

So I pinched pennies and ate whatever was on sale in grocery stores and markets. I picked up some day old sushi rolls for a dollar and bought cheap samosas at a farmers market near Quebec City.

Quebec City is gorgeous. I had a Couchsurfing host lined up there and was down to \$10 when I arrived. While the cities of Europe were nice, they always felt like something was missing from them. It's because I'm North American and we North Americans have a different sense of space, nature, and history.

Quebec City has the charm of old Europe, the flavor of France, and the essence of North America. It's like a U.S. city without most of the negatives like gun violence, McDonalds on every corner, Walmart, Starbucks, and an uptight Protestant Christian ethic. I instantly loved it. If I could figure out how to swap my citizenship overnight, I would be proud to walk around with a Mapleleaf. Too bad old Dickwad and I couldn't switch citizenship. (Incidentally, I've never been one of those Americans who pretends to be Canadian...I'd just like to be one in real life.)

My host in Quebec City was a lovely girl. There was also another couch surfer staying at the same time. He was a Spaniard who was like the energizer bunny, non stop talking in three languages. I did my laundry, went to the chocolate museum where there were plenty of free samples and walked, walked, walked. I felt good, exhausted.

I fell in love with Quebec City. Gorgeous public spaces, parks, walkways, public art, concerts, museums, and a beautiful public library. Four levels, central atrium, huge audio and visual section where you can check out movies or watch them, large art section filled with art - as in full size paintings and sculpture, and a fountain in the middle. Truly civilized. That library in Quebec City might be the best thing western civilization offers.

VAGO DAMITIO

CROSSING CANADA WITH \$4

In Canada, hitching is safe, but you run the risk of being left out in the prairie for a cold, cold night. (And of course there are nutjobs in Canada – you are always taking a risk when you hit the road whether you are hitching or crossing it.)

I wasn't sure about the advisability of my plan, but since I couldn't access the money in my bank account and I had \$4 Canadian left, I didn't have much choice. Canada has 33 million people and is the second largest country by land mass in the world. For perspective, New York has about 8 million people. What this means is there are great stretches of unpopulated landscape in Canada.

Canada is BIG. And beautiful.

I spent a great couple of days hanging out with my host in Quebec City before I hit the road. I pulled out my trusty black marker, pulled some cardboard from a garbage pile, and made a sign. Vancouver. Always make a sign and always carry a sharpie. I also found a pinwheel in the garbage I attached to it.

After fifteen cars a young couple stopped and gave me a lift. They had driven to Quebec City over night and were driving straight back to Montreal. They had rented an apartment in Quebec City and accidentally overdrew their account so they pulled out the cash and rushed to Quebec City in the middle of the night to leave cash for the landlord so they didn't lose the lease with a bounced check..

They gave me cookies for the road. My next ride was an old Frenchman who spoke no English but saw my sign and said "Vancouver?"

"Oui." I said. "Vancouver?"

"Oui." He said it with so much enthusiasm while he smiled and shook his fist. I couldn't believe my luck. He didn't look like he was prepared for a long journey. That was because he wasn't going on one. He dropped me off in an industrial gas area in the North of Montreal a few minutes

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

later and headed off to work. He picked me up because he was a Vancouver Canucks hockey fan. Hitching in industrial areas of cities is much harder than hitching from the outskirts. The Canucks screwed me.

I spent most of the day walking the 15 miles from one end of Montreal to the other. You can't hitch in an urban wasteland. Not even in Canada. Finally, a bus came. I had picked up a few used bus transfers from bins near a bus stops I'd passed, I decided to jump on board the next one and get out of town. No luck, Montreal has an electronic validation system. I walked more and then decided to try again a second bus from a gritty industrial area. The bus stop was littered broken glass and bad graffiti.

The bus stopped and I told the driver I didn't have any money. She told me to get on board. Then she gave me two valid transfers. These took me all the way to St. Anne du Bellevue, a nice suburb in the west of the city. I walked across the final bridge to get out of Montreal with a nice hippie couple I met who were out for a walk..

I was now in a great spot for hitching with a few hours of daylight left and hopes of reaching Ottawa which lay an hour and a half away (by car). A young couple offered a short ride which I declined. They gave me snacks and a juice box before leaving. Then an older guy offered a slightly longer ride I accepted, but in hindsight, I should have held out in the sweet spot for a ride to Ottawa.

The old guy drove me past the highway split for Ottawa/Toronto and assured me it didn't matter. It didn't matter if you were driving. Since I didn't have a map, I didn't argue. He dropped me off in the middle of nowhere on the highways that leads to Toronto. "Okay," I thought "I'll head to Toronto." I stuck out my thumb and ten cars later someone pulled over. It was the police.

They examined my passport and told me to get off the highway. They told me they'd arrest me if they found me back on the highway but that I could hitch on a back road that led the same direction. Big bummer with an hour of daylight left. I had to walk two miles to get to the 'highway' they'd told me about. By the time I was there the mosquitoes and black flies were out, it was starting to get dark, and there was no Westbound traffic. I was exhausted too.

I needed to find a place to crash out. There was an abandoned pickup truck with a camper shell off the side of the road so I crawled in, put on my two jackets, and fell asleep. No sleeping bag. I knew it was a bad idea doing this without one, but no other option. I didn't have one.

Four hours of sleeping in the old dirty truck and I woke up freezing. It

VAGO DAMITIO

had become an icebox. My teeth were knocking and I knew I had to warm myself up or else my situation would go from bad to worse. I walked to the river, lit a small fire, and thawed myself.

Then I walked back to the highway again, despite the police and began hitching. Soon a car pulled over. It was two more cops and the same routine. I was sorry I took the ride from the old guy. I should have waited in that nice suburb. Freezing, no rides, 3:30 am. As I walked off the ramp a car pulled over and two guys asked if I knew how to get to Ottawa. I told them I did and asked if I could catch a ride with them. They said yes. I hopped in, got them pointed in the right direction, and fell asleep in the back seat. They dropped me two hours later at a truck stop outside Ottawa.

Inside, I used the restroom to brush my teeth and clean up. I sat at the counter and explained to the truck stop cutie behind the counter what I was doing. I'd ordered a bottomless cup of coffee. When I asked for the bill, she told me it was a penny. I had found a penny on the side of the freeway the day before. She gave me a cup to go when I decided to go start hitching the on-ramp again. Another very sweet girl. The world is filled with wonderful women.

On the highway I was picked up by an army nurse who treated me to another coffee and a doughnut from Tim Hortons. She drove me to the outskirts of Ottawa. It was too close to the city though so I ended up walking all the way through Ottawa and Montreal both.

Ottawa looked interesting, at least the center, but I didn't stop. My transfer trick worked in Ottawa and I caught long city bus ride to the Western edge of the city from downtown. From there I tried hitching the ramps for three hours with no luck. The highway patrol station was right next to me so walking onto the freeway was not an option. Instead I walked across the street to "The Beer Store" found the manager and asked if he had any damaged cans of cold beer he would give me for free. He found one. The cold beer tasted like heaven as I sat on a nearby bench drinking it.

Back to the ramp and I drew a sign that said Aloha! on it and started to give people thumbs down when they passed me without stopping. A friendly guy picked me up, got me stoned, and gave me half a pack of smokes before dropping me on the outskirts of Ottawa. I love Canada.

I stood for quite a while and then a long haul trucker on his two days off picked me up in his mother's car. He was Canadian but way more 'American' than me. He talked about how our two countries are the same, how we both have 'nigger' and 'chink' problems. He told me how the border is already open for criminals and it might as well be open for

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

everyone else. Aside from his bigotry and Rush Limbaugh mentality, he had a real heart of gold. I make a point of not arguing with my rides and yet when they make statements like his, I can't agree, so I asked him questions in the hope of broadening his mind. I don't know if it worked or not, but I do know he drove me about 4 hours west, bought me a chicken dinner and a coke, gave me \$5, and wished me good luck.

I wished him good luck too since he was on his way to meet a woman he had met online and he was hoping to get lucky. I now had \$9. There I was in North Bay, Ontario. It was a few hours to sunset and on the way I had seen signs that advertised "The Worlds Best Smoothie" along with free WiFi.

I used the free WiFi while talking with the girl behind the counter. I told her about my trip and asked if she had any extra smoothie for me. She did. As I sat in the sun, I drank the world's best smoothie.

I had put in a couple of last minute couch requests but a few hours went by with no rides and no calls from couch surfers. I thought I might sleep on that corner since I was stuck by a no pedestrians sign again. Then two smiling girls pulled over and waved for me to come join them.

Two awesome girls who lived in Sudbury. They saw me hitching and drove by three times before they decided to pick me up (because of my hat). Within a couple of minutes of getting in the car, we were solidly friends. Great music, great conversation, and funny stories came to pass. They offered me crash their couch. Their house was filled with musical instruments and empty beer bottles. In the morning we feasted on leftover Chinese noodles. They gave me a pack of smokes and plenty of beers. They asked me to stick around for a few days. It was a very welcome invitation.

With 941 kilometers (585 miles) covered so far with about 3400 kilometers (2113 miles) to go, it would have been foolish to rush myself. So I stayed in Sudbury. It's an interesting place. 1.8 billion years ago a huge meteorite composed of mostly nickel smashed into Earth where Sudbury exists today. 150 years ago, Canadians started mining that nickel. The nickel mining process is incredibly environmentally destructive and until about five years ago Sudbury looked like the surface of the moon because of the huge slag piles from the mines.

Thomas Edison visited the Sudbury area as a prospector in 1901, and is credited with the original discovery of the ore body at Falconbridge. During the Apollo lunar exploration program, NASA astronauts trained in Sudbury to become familiar with shatter cones: a rare rock formation connected with meteorite impacts. There is a rumor that the moon landings were faked...at Sudbury.

VAGO DAMITIO

This is a railroad town and sits on the trans Canadian highway, so it has a familiar essence to it. The people are an interesting mix of weeded out bums, artists, musicians, and environmental activists.

We recycled all the beer bottles in my new friends' apartment which gave us enough to buy five more cases of beer and some groceries. Their couches were filled with a constantly shifting cast of interesting characters. There was a fair amount of anti-American sentiment as a result of Canadian troops getting killed in the Iraq and Afghan wars; the influence of U.S. products, entertainment, and institutions; and the overall lack of awareness that Canada which exists in the states.

I had to remind one guy to stop referring to issues in the United States as if I was responsible for them i.e. "All of your guns are getting smuggled into Canada by gangs" and "You use more energy than the rest of the world combined."

"I don't have any guns to smuggle and I don't even live in the US any longer," I raised my hands and everyone laughed. Still, they were serious about the issues. Someday Canada is going to get tired of being pushed around. It's a hard point to get across that despite the accident of being born in the U.S., I am not responsible for what my country does. Certainly I don't own any guns and I use a negligible amount of energy. I voted for Ralph Nader three times.

The days passed quickly but then one of my awesome lady friends decided to drive West to Winnipeg and asked me to come along and share in the driving. It was time to go anyway, but I was glad I don't have to hitch since it had started raining and was forecast to keep raining for the next few days at least. I'm glad those girls picked me up. We can call that the best ride ever.

The generosity and good nature of these fine women took the edge off the road. I caught a ride with from Sudbury to Winnipeg, a drive of more than twenty hours. She had never done a drive that distance alone so I was both instructor and relief driver. We drove straight through all the way to Thunder Bay and had to pull in to a rest stop because we were too exhausted to drive. On the way we spotted moose, a fox, and some deer. We almost accidentally crossed into the United States. It was terrifying. Never mind my license was expired...that was in another country anyway.

It was a fun road trip and we picked up another hitch hiker along the way. He told us he had spent the past two weeks trying to get out of Ontario. Ontario is huge and to drive along Lake Superior is more like driving along the ocean than along a lake. He was hitching with his dog. I wished I were hitching with a dog but then maybe that's why he'd been

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

stuck for two weeks while I was getting picked up and taken home by awesome women. We dropped him outside of Winnipeg and then it was time for us to say goodbye.

It was totally sad to part ways in Winnipeg but the time had come. The best part is that I made new friends for life. It was good to have that comfort and fun because I was heading back onto the rough and lonely road. They put me at ease in a place I'd never been. She left me at a truckstop on the West side of Winnipeg.

I found a truck that was heading to Calgary three hours later and I foolishly decided to hitch instead. On the way to the road from the truck stop I stepped in a swamp and covered my shoes, socks, and the bottoms of my jeans with muck. Then I caught a ride with a stoned old broad who drove erratically but was generous with her dope. She told me she had to go by her sister's house to let the dog out and needed to leave me on a remote and lonely corner. She said she would come pick me up a 1/2 hour later. This was about an hour before sunset. She didn't come back.

I stood there trying to hitch a ride from nowhere for hours and hours. Then it started to get cold, then it started to get windy, then the trucks started flashing their brights at me. If I hadn't of been told she was coming back, I might have walked somewhere or built a shelter in the nearby woods, but as it was I was stuck once it got dark and couldn't leave as long as there was hope she might come back and on one else stopped.

I don't know what happened to her, but she left me in a bad situation. My suspicion is she smoked more weed and fell asleep. Or maybe she became paranoid and needed to get me out of the car. Maybe she crashed her car into a ditch, that wouldn't have surprised me given the way she drove. It was a ride that left me freezing on the prairie with muddy feet and no blankets.

I didn't know where this bad luck was coming from but then I realized I'd left my lucky traveling hat in Dawn's trunk. That hat has helped me with a lot of rides. Now it was in Dawn's hands and I hoped she would take good care of it. Despite the missing luck of my hat, a traveling salesman (Praise Bob Dobbs!) named stopped to see what I was doing there, found out I didn't have anyplace to stay, and told me about a dry thicket about a quarter mile ahead. He was heading the other direction. He also gave me a blanket from his trunk. That dude was a lifesaver. I slept like a log in the thicket though I heard some coyotes in the night nearby. It was cold but not deadly.

In the morning I caught a ride to Regina from an out of work electrician and then spent hours trying to escape it. It was windy, hot, and

VAGO DAMITIO

cold all at the same time. I tried the highway, the secondary road, and the truck stop. No luck. At the truck stop there was a free WiFi connection and a nice old waitress. Not everything was bad and besides, at least I wasn't on the road outside of Regina any more.

Having access to the internet meant I heard from my buddy about the kayak job I was on my way to. Guess what? There was no job. They hired someone who arrived before me. I had no idea what to do from that point forward so I figured I would head to Bellingham and see what happened.

You have no idea how big Canada is until you try to cross it with no sleeping bag, no car, no tent, and no money. From the truck stop in Regina, I spent all day trying to thumb a ride and finally caught a lift with guys in their mid-twenties. One was a punk rock philosopher who did some hard time and now counsels at risk youth. The other was a surly drug addict who drives a beat up pickup and works in migrant labor. The ride was here and there from Regina to Calgary in about three times the time it should have taken as we made frequent stops to deliver bags of weed.. As we drove, we talked about our religious philosophies and I found myself digging the punk rock code these guys lived by and taught to troubled kids. They were pot dealers, but they were doing more good than harm in the world..

In Calgary they gave me directions through town and after taking the 'C' train to the outskirts using a found bus transfer, I hitched a ride at 7 am. I'd had no sleep but I was at the base of the Colorado Rockies. I was glad to be off the prairie. My next ride let me out at an isolated freeway exit after about 45 minutes of driving. I forgot his name but he was a nice guy going hiking in the mountains. He gave me his dashboard change to get something cold to drink but there was no store near where he left me.

About the same time I saw a bear walking down the railroad tracks that ran parallel to the road,

I was picked up by a retired forester who drove me from there all the way to Kamloops, British Columbia by way of all the ranges of mountains complete with their names, elevations, and local color he gained from working in the woods for the previous 30 years. He took me to Lake Louise, waterfalls, the spiral tunnels, and his other favorite places. It was like having the best tour guide possible to see the Canadian Rockies. He bought me lunch, then a snack, and finally he drove me 45 miles past his destination and bought me dinner too!

Meanwhile we talked about life, history, his wife in Thailand and the life they are slowly putting together while he closes up his life in Canada. His wife is 50, he is about 65, she is Thai, he is Canadian. I wonder how

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

life worked out for them. Given what a cool guy he was, I'm betting he lives somewhere fantastic with a wife who adores and pampers him. I hope so. It was nice to hear this old lumberjack speaking to her in Thai on the phone as they planned their future together. We took a hike on a glacial slope together and became friends. I learned much about life and happiness from him in the short time we were together. He was like a messenger sent to teach me wonderful things. To some extent, every ride is like that. Every person is like that if we take the time to learn from them.

He left me at the Kamloops truck stop where I rolled up in my blanket and slept in a big soft pile of dirt outside of the lamps light. I woke at 4:30 am and caught a ride with an oilman from Edmonton who had just discarded all of all his possessions and was on a vision quest because his wife left him and his best friend had just hung himself. Ride with a guy like that and your problems come into a true perspective. He was rearranging his priorities in life.

He drove me all the way to Vancouver and told me how he was going to give his wedding ring and watch from his ex-wife to the first worthy bum he met. He offered to give them to me, but I suggested he give them to an old bum who had been around the block a few times. It was silly, he wanted to give them to me. I should have accepted them. It's another lesson, it's important to be able to accept things that people want to give you. I felt guilty taking more than the ride and the breakfast he bought me but it was silly to say no thank you.

Vancouver, for those who don't know, sits on the West Coast of Canada. I was in Vancouver and I had enough money to take a city bus to the U.S.-Canada border at the Peace Arch. That particular border is fifteen miles from Bellingham, Washington. It was the most hassle free entry into my country of origin I have ever encountered. I walked across the border with no bag check. The border agent walked me across past the guys who might have searched me after I told him I had hitched across Canada.

One of my best friends from Bellingham came and picked me up. The next few days it was all steak dinners, great beer, and good friends while I figured out what the hell I was going to do now that there was no kayak job. I managed to get my bank account access restored because the bank had a branch in Bellingham, but I didn't have the job to pay off some of my student loan debts, get me back to New York for my return flight, and pay for my wedding in Morocco. It could have been worse.

VAGO DAMITIO

MY FATHER THE NIT-PICKER

I'm tempted to leave this part out, but it's a part of this story so I'm not going to. You may remember my father and I had stopped speaking when I 'ruined the family name' by writing Rough Living. At this point, it had been six years and the ice had thawed. I'd seen him at my sister's wedding and we had talked briefly. I'd left a few meaningful personal items at his house while I traveled.

Before I left Hawaii, I mailed my tax and identity documents, some heirlooms, keepsakes and a few other souvenirs from life to his house in Arizona - because he's the kind of guy who has more than one. Part of our relationship issues had always been that his number one priority is him and as his son, I thought maybe I should have some priority. For instance, when he said he would do something, I thought he should do it. His thinking on that, was he should do it - as long as it didn't inconvenience him in any way.

I called him when I arrived back in Bellingham and he suggested I should come pay a visit. He'd built a big contracting business in California over the years and my sister told me that he wanted to pass it on to someone. My sister didn't want it and my brother and I weren't on speaking terms with him. He had foreclosed on an apartment building he'd bought in the Southern California town where we'd lived before he and my mom had divorced, Big Bear Lake. When I called, he was remodeling it and was also in the process of foreclosing on a laundromat he'd sold a few years earlier. Yes, he's that guy. He owns lots of stuff. He's a great golfer and all his buddies like him - of course he does seem to get new buddies every couple of years.

One way or another, it came up I should go and help him with the apartments. He offered me five months work for a good wage, a place to stay, and the chance to rebuild our relationship. I knew I should say no. Based on past experience, I knew how it would end. But he was my father and I wanted to believe him. I knew it was a mistake, but I was in a pickle since the kayak job had disappeared.

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

So I agreed.

I bought a ticket from Seattle to San Diego and he came and met me at the airport. For a guy in his seventies he looked good. Spending time on the golf course and swinging a hammer every day had kept him looking young and fit. He looked more like he was in his fifties than his seventies.

The first few weeks were great. I had my Dad back. We had a great time together, it was fun. I'm not positive what happened after that - it was a combination of him nit-picking my work and me becoming increasingly defensive about it. As kids, my brother, my cousins, and I nicknamed him the nit-picker. He'd given us all jobs at some point and we'd all either quit or been fired by him as he nit-picked his way through our work. Nothing was ever good enough for him.

We lived in the apartment we were remodeling. He brought his wife to live there with him in the first restored apartment and stuck me in a stripped out one with an air mattress. I had better digs when I was surfing couches. He and his wife had a car but they wouldn't let me use it. They could go shopping, go away, or take a few days off - I was stuck in the apartment building with no way to go get groceries, go visit friends, or get away from the job site if I needed to. I bought a \$10 bicycle, but in a mountain town - it wasn't enough. A few childhood friends came into town and he seemed incredibly bothered that I had the nerve to ask for a day or two off. He worked every day.

Before the nit-picking began in earnest, I actually thought our relationship had improved. I thought he had changed. I wanted him to be proud of me, so I decided to order him a copy of each of my books as a Father's Day gift. I don't know why I ever thought it was a good idea. I wanted to believe he'd grown up. I was wrong. As soon as I told him, the old wounds about me writing about my life rose up. It wasn't as if I had written about him, but he was offended we had the same last name. He was ashamed of me! Not only that, he was pissed about it. The nit-picking became worse after that and I began to respond to him just like I'd respond to any asshole boss.

One month into it - he knocked on my door at 6:30 in the morning after we'd had a brief argument the night before about me taking a day off. He handed me a check and told me to go away. He didn't say "You're fired!" He said "Take all your things and go away right now. Don't come back." I was fired and evicted and I had no backup plan. I told him I needed a day or two and he told me I needed to go within the hour. I was flabbergasted and hurt. I threw what possessions I couldn't carry on my back into his dumpster, put on my shoulder bag, and rode my \$10 bicycle

VAGO DAMITIO

down the 7000 foot mountain he'd brought me up to work for him. So Long Nit-Picker!

I'd always wanted to do that bike ride. It was terrifying and ridiculously fun, especially because my brakes weren't so good on that old ten speed. My childhood friend called and asked if I wanted to go get a drink. She lived in Palm Springs and was on her way to go up the mountain. As luck had it, she was passing right by where I was, Lucerne Valley. I wasn't really prepared to ride a twenty year old ten-speed through Death Valley and Joshua Tree without any supplies. She picked me up and we went back up the mountain to her parent's place.

I stayed with her family for a few days and then went to stay with my uncle. Being the Nit-Picker's brother, he simply asked me "Didn't you realize this was going to happen?" Yeah, I had, but it was done and so we didn't talk about it any further.

I spoke with my brother and he pointed out that I needed to go get my possessions from my father's house as soon as possible. When my father and my brother had fallen out some years before, the Nit-Picker threw all of my brother's belongings into the garbage. As kids if the Nit-Picker found our rooms to dirty, he would throw out all of our toys. I felt certain he would do the same with my things as soon as he got back to Arizona.

It was a month before I was able to arrange a way to get to his Arizona house to get my documents, keepsakes, and heirlooms. I had made the arrangements by speaking with his wife. He knew I was coming. I called and told them. I was halfway there when he called and told me it wasn't possible and I should go back to my brother's house in Utah. I went anyway and once there, he had his wife's sister supervise to make sure I wasn't taking anything besides what was mine. I was polite on the phone because I had to be. That was the last I spoke to him. Being childish myself, I wrote up the whole thing and broadcast messaged it to everyone I knew with the last name Damitio. It's a good thing I'm not a Christian or Jew because I broke that commandment about honoring my father. If the God of Abraham exists, I'm going to hell but I'm sure I'll see the Nit-Picker there.

I haven't spoken to him since. Nothing but broken promises and broken vows exist with him. His life has been littered with them. I want to acknowledge, I'm far from perfect. I'm not a good person, but when I tell someone I'm going to do something, I do it. When I borrow money, I pay it back. And if I ever make a promise to my kids, you can be sure I'll keep it. The reason why is because I know how much it hurts when the person you should be able to trust above all others demonstrates again and again you don't matter. It hurts. That's all I have to say about that.

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

RETURNING TO MOROCCO

I made it back to Morocco. Getting back was a long strange trip. Back to New York, back to Dublin, back to Brussels, and back to Fez. I was hurt my fiancee didn't meet me at the airport, but she had no money and our time apart had made the relationship strange. I should tell you her name since now you know I went back to her. Hanane. It means tender in Arabic.

Her house was full of people including a large Belgian man her sister had met over the internet and become engaged to without actually meeting in person. I wanted a triumphant arrival back in Morocco but this was far from my imagined hero's welcome. The jumbo Belgian was the new hero. I was already landed in the boat but he was still on the hook. He and the sister rushed around to get all their paperwork done so they could marry before he left, but as I suspected would happen, they failed at the last minute. He needed his divorce papers to say he was 'definitely divorced' not just 'divorced.' Moroccan authorities are careful when it comes to paper work. He returned to Belgium and planned to come back at Christmas. There were lots of people around the my future in-laws house for the engagement party. Everyone wanted to meet the new foreigner of the family.

I rented an apartment in the casbah of the old Medina of Sefrou. Rent was about \$100 a month. I liked to think it was about 700 years old but no one knew. The casbah was formed in about 700 A.D. So it could be over 1000 years old and possess bits of the character of all the people who have lived in it over time.

Through the help of my British friend Jess (the only other English speaking foreigner in Sefrou), I managed to score a job at the American Language Center in Fez, quite a prestigious gig. We also landed Hanane a job there! No small feat to land a job for a Moroccan there since the pay is high by Moroccan standards. It wasn't terrible by U.S. standards either at \$20 an hour. Two jobs...awesome.

VAGO DAMITIO

My apartment was a bright, cheery blue. Every bit of it. Doors, door frames, window frames, shelves, walls, ceiling. All bright and cheerful. I found some cheap furniture and slept like a baby with the sound of the river Aggai flowing next to me. I woke to birds singing in the bushes across the river from me. I had a job, I had a home, I had a fiancee. It was smooth living all the way.



I loved my little place in the Casbah. I felt like I'd found a home.

RESISTANCE IS FUTILE – BECOMING A MUSLIM

As with most of my experience in Morocco, I've written more about this in Not My Morocco. It is worth saying a few words here about the process. First, let's get some definitions and wording out of the way.

Arabic language is based largely on three letter root words. The key word we need be most concerned with is SLM. SLM means 'peace'. Islam (iSLaM) is the 'path to peace'. A Muslim (muSLiM) is a person who is on the path to peace. The path to peace in Islam is through giving up one's own desires and surrendering to the will and desire of God, called Allah. By definition, becoming a Muslim means becoming one who submits to the will of God. Resistance is futile, because after all, we're talking about God here.

In 1995, my brother introduced me to a Sufi dervish from Turkey who struck me as a profound and wise individual. He said, in one of the few times I met him "Everyone and everything is Muslim, because what choice have we, but to follow the will of God." I liked that a lot and from that time forward, there were times in my life when I told people I was Muslim based on that definition.

For most Muslims in the world, the definition is more precise. A Muslim is made a Muslim by the shahada which is the oath a Muslim takes. In ancient pirate times in Morocco, desirable men and women who were born Jews or Christians were often 'tricked' into saying the shahada which goes like this in Arabic "Allah alahi ilallah wa Mohammadan rasullallah" - try it out loud. It sounds nice, right? Got ya! According to ancient tradition, you are now Muslim. There's a nice trick built into Islam where once you become Muslim, you are never allowed to become anything else! If you said it out loud, you are Muslim forever.

Why do you think they tricked desirable mates into becoming Muslims? It's simple, Muslim men can marry any of the people who share Abraham as the founder of the faith - so a Muslim man can marry a

VAGO DAMITIO

Muslim, a Jewish or a Christian woman (actually he can marry up to eight of them). However, back in old times, when a woman renounced her faith - she couldn't go back to her people or they stoned her - and I don't mean they would smoke Canadian weed with her. When a beautiful captive was tricked into saying the shahada - she was stuck and had to accept the faith or die.

For women, it's different. A Muslim woman isn't allowed to marry any man except a Muslim man. It's not fair, but that's the way it goes. If a Muslim woman falls in love with a foreign man - the foreigner has to convert in order for there to be any marriage. The reason for this 'rule' is in a patriarchal society, the children tend to follow the religion of the father and early Muslims (or God, if you prefer) wanted to make sure they weren't creating infidels by procreation.

When I lived next to the mosque in Hawaii, I joined for prayer now and then (just as I sat through Mass a few times in Italy). I said the shahada long ago - so technically, I was Muslim before I came to Morocco. I'm still a Buddhist too. I'm certain it doesn't matter what I call myself because while I believe in God, I don't believe God comes down and meddles in the affairs of people. I've read the Quran, the Bible, the Upanishads, the Egyptian Book of the Dead, the Tao te Ching and other holy books. All of them contain great wisdom and all of them also contained what I can not so delicately label, a bunch of horse crap.

Anyone who doesn't think religion is used by man to control other men is completely delusional. It's obvious. When you have a religion and you want to control people, you codify what you want the people to do and put it in the religious books. I like to think they were divinely inspired and then mucked about with and changed by humans who wanted to get more control of their societies. All of them. Divine inspiration is where I think God may well muddle in our affairs. I like that Qur'an says God sent messengers and prophets to all the people of the world. Thousands and thousands of them. This, to me, means every holy book and every religion can be considered valid.

Qur'an goes on to say all the holy books were corrupted and God sent Mohammad as the final messenger (of course) to deliver the Qur'an. That was fine by me as it meant I didn't have to believe in Joseph Smith and his magic hat but let's be honest, every religion says their prophet is the last one, the only one, or the right one.

The shahada (declaration of faith) translates to "There is no God but God and Mohammad is his prophet." - Great. I can get behind that because God is the unknowable force in the universe and by saying there was no God but God I was saying that I believed there was something

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

beyond my power to know called God. And of course, Mohammad (and everyone else who wrote a holy book) was a prophet of God - somehow channeling wisdom could bring human happiness into a book form - in this case, the Qur'an.

There I was - in Morocco, in love with a Muslim girl and when they asked 'are you a Muslim?' and I said to myself - "Hmm...let's see, I'm a person who is seeking peace, I believe in God but without believing I know what God is, I believe Mohammad was one of his prophets, I've said the shahada and besides, that dervish said we are all Muslims." So I answered "Yes, I'm a Muslim."

After that I had to go to a religious authority, say the shahada out loud and explained to him how I became a Muslim. I said something similar to the above but my wife translated what she thought it should be (like she'd done with my request for her hand) and the authority wrote down a third version! I paid him 300 dirham (about \$35), which we negotiated down from 1000 dirham). He stamped the paper stamped and voila! I was 'officially' a Muslim.

In truth, there are other requirements to be a Muslim. According to most Muslim doctrines, a Muslim must adhere to the five pillars of Islam

1. Speaking the shahada.
2. Praying five times per day.
3. Fasting during Ramadan.
4. Giving charity.
5. Making a pilgrimage to Mecca in your lifetime.

Also, to abstain from pork, alcohol, no tattoos, washing a certain way and other requirements - but let's be honest, while I believe in charity and fast for health, the rest of that stuff didn't fall into my belief system at all.

The reason I converted was so I could marry my fiancee. I knew it and so did everyone else. Never mind I'd said the shahada the first time in 1995 and, technically, that was when I became a Muslim. I wasn't tricked into it. I was forced into it if I wanted to marry Hanane. There was no other option, because I asked her to run away but she wouldn't abandon her family or her faith. Both are far to important to her.

THE HORROR OF INTERNATIONAL MARRIAGE

If you want to add mountains of stress to your life and make yourself as crazy as a loon, there is no easier way to do it than to marry someone who didn't originate in the same country or culture as you did. Don't worry, while meeting and marrying my wife is a part of this story, I'm not going to focus on the specifics. I've already done that in *Not My Morocco* (available at www.vagodamitio.com).

Here is the short version.

In order for us to be married in my Hanane's country, I had to get state and federal police records from the USA. I needed a medical examination, recent documentation of my birth (I know that sounds funny but I had to provide a certified birth certificate less than three months old), proof of identity, proof of employment (in Morocco), proof that I'd never been married or was 'definitely divorced', and proof I was a Muslim.

Hanane had to prove she was eligible to marry and document the permission of her family.

It sounds much simpler than it was because each paper needs to be officially translated, stamped by various departments in various cities, certified by other departments in other cities, more certified copies made, more stamps, more official reviews, more stamps, and of course there is a cost attached to this. Making the process even more confusing, the list isn't definitive. It changes from town to town or from clerk to clerk. Add to that, the stamps expire after three months so if some clerk drags his heels because you didn't know you needed to bribe him, you have to start over again.

It was good I'd insisted on a one-year engagement because that was how long it took to get the official marriage completed. That was the beginning of the stress and hair pulling. Next, we had to plan the ceremonial wedding. My wife comes from a conservative small town

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

where the weddings are universally the same but change on a matter of scale. Basically, there is a big party. Everyone is invited. The women bake cookies and prepare food for a few days before the big event, then everyone for miles around converges on the house of the bride. The women prepare henna, dance, sing, and feast. Nearby, but separated, the men eat and discuss business and family matters - or, as I'd seen a few times, stare blankly at each other, thinking "I can't believe I'm stuck at another wedding, but at least the food is good."

Finally, there is a big disco party. I don't know how or when this came to be part of it but there are huge blown out speakers, fancy table cloths and chair covers rented from the wedding rental shop, another big meal, gift packets for the guests, and lots of cookies served by the girls. The women wear their most beautiful kaftans or take turns wearing the ones provided by the wedding rental shop. Late at night, the bride is brought from her house on a palanquin carried by male family members all dressed in white djellabas. There is the Moroccan version of a Klezmer band with horns, drums, and some chanting which follows her. After that, she and the groom sit on thrones placed high above everyone else where they pose for pictures and disco the night away. That's it.

We didn't do that. My wife's family raised hell about it. The neighbors raised hell about it. Four years later, people have finally stopped complaining they didn't get invited to our party. I like to put it this way "We're not disco people."

Since we were in Morocco, it was hard for me to invite any of my friends or family. It's a long way from Hawaii or the West Coast of North America to Morocco. I was never into inviting people to my wedding anyway. I always figured it was more about the bride and groom and one thing I didn't like about the local weddings was they looked like the bride and groom weren't having a good time but everyone else was. Shouldn't it be about the bride and groom enjoying their day?

The international family makes the planning of an international wedding an international pain in the ass. I thought Hanane was lined up with me on what we wanted. We talked about what we wanted, we agreed, and then her family shifted the whole process and we had to fight over the same painful points again and again. Wash, rinse, and repeat. We talked, we fought, we agreed, the family interfered, and we'd fight again. A couple of years into this I wonder if she was agreeing with me out of politeness but she would use her family to reiterate what she really wanted. It was a way of arguing without taking responsibility. As I said earlier, there is no word in Arabic for compromise. I've tried to explain the concept of compromise to her and she insists there is a word for

VAGO DAMITIO

compromise in Arabic – it means roughly 'weak loser.'” I would ask her the truth about our wedding planning, but I've learned enough to know she wouldn't tell me anyway. Hshuma (deep shame).

Another reason international marriages are a pain in the ass is because while no man ever can truly understand a woman (or vice-versa but we men are easier to 'get' than women are) - the chances of understanding a woman from a different culture is absolutely zero. You never will and until you figure that out, life will be periodically miserable.

But that's not all. Since we married, I haven't been back to my own country. In fact, it would have been nice to go visit but since my wife is an Arab Muslim and comes from a country where there have been some extremists and bombers, it's not easy. If I were well off or wealthy, it probably wouldn't be so hard, but in fact, it's hard to take a Moroccan national anywhere. For me, as an American, it's easy to grab my passport, get on a plane and go where I want. For my wife there is a very small list of countries she can go to without first obtaining an often expensive, paper work intensive, big pain in the ass visa.

Guess who has to do the research, paperwork, and paying? Yeah, that's right: me. All of you guys who married someone from your own country, someone who understands paperwork or someone with a privileged passport have no idea how good you have it. Surprisingly, this wasn't something I considered when we decided to marry. I believed "We'll get married and she'll be my wife so we will be able to go back to my country and then she can get citizenship." Man, that was so naive. We've been married for more than three years, we have a baby (who I did get US citizenship for) and we are still (as I write this in 2013) waiting for the visa process that will let her come to the USA. All of that means - I can't go home, go back to school, get a decent job, or introduce my wife and child to my mother, brother, or sister. That's a pain in the ass.

But wait..there's more. There are many cultural, religious, and societal differences we have to contend with. Sometimes, these differences can be wonderful, but sometimes it can be enough to make me wonder whether everything was a huge mistake. To put that statement into perspective, most foreigner/Moroccan engagements don't end up becoming marriages. Furthermore, most of those that do become marriages fail. Furthermore, the number of couples that end up immigrating to the USA are only a small percentage of those.

Here's a great example of the unexpected problems that can arise. Remember my beautiful little apartment in the casbah? I have to admit, it wasn't perfect - but no place in Morocco is. I liked it. It was calm, peaceful, well-located, comfortable, and incredibly cheap. The casbah

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

apartment cost less than \$100 a month, it looked out over the river from my bedroom, I woke up and went to sleep to the sound of birds and the river. It was next door to my only foreign friend in Sefrou, and it was in the medina so it was close to everything. There were no cars and it was always interesting.

After our legal marriage, Hanane moved in. It was the first time she'd lived away from her parents, but she was growing used to it. She wasn't keen on it because for Sefrouis, the casbah is where you live if you are poor. It's a shameful thing to be poor for Moroccans. The casbah is rumored to be where you go for drugs, prostitutes, or gambling. In truth, the area for that isn't the casbah, it's the mellah – the old Jewish quarter. My wife was becoming alright with living in the casbah. She recognized that being the wife of a foreigner counter-balanced living in the casbah and took some of the shame away from living there.

Then, her mother came to visit. After that, we couldn't stay in the casbah. We had to find a new place because it was shameful for her mom to walk into the casbah. It was hshuma. It was maddening because I liked living there. I was happy in that tiny place. It was perfect for me and the life I envisaged for us in Sefrou. She had been coming around to it but once Mama spoke, it was over and done. We had to move out of the casbah. Again, I didn't know then about the lack of compromise in Arabic life. If I had been an Arab man, I would have refused to leave and that would have been the end of it. I was trying to find a way to make us both happy though, which, it turned out, is impossible.

I had to move out of my house but I wasn't going to let her mom pick where I lived. Instead, I moved us to Fez - further away from Mama. I also resolved as soon as I could, I would move us even further away to Turkey or another country. Her mom should have left us alone..but that's not the mother-in-law way in any culture. Yeah, it's a big pain in the ass, but sometimes it can also be wonderful to be married to an exotic beauty from another culture.

(I'd like to add here that Hanane's mom is a lovely woman and the problem was with Hanane and I. She should have told her mom to mind her own business and I should have refused to leave a place that offered everything I wanted in a little home. As with most things in my life that have made me unhappy, this was under my control but I let it go. Live and learn.)

VAGO DAMITIO

BERBER NOMAD WEDDING IN THE SAHARA

I wanted our wedding to be like a story from the *1001 Nights*. Since I was paying for everything, we skipped the whole Sefrou disco party wedding plan and instead we invited her family to come to the Sahara desert for our Berber nomad wedding. Her father and brothers didn't want to come, they were relieved to miss a wedding though we were both sad her father didn't make it. He's a shepherd and he said he didn't have anyone he could trust his sheep with while he went away. It sounded like an excuse to me, but I respect excuses not to go to weddings.

It was the two of us, her mother, her sisters and her newest boyfriend, her sister-in-law with her two sons, and two American teachers from the school we worked at who came along mainly because they wanted to see the Sahara. I'd contacted a Berber friend in the Sahara who assured me he was setting the perfect Sahara nomad wedding for us. I wanted to go over the details, but he told me not to worry about a thing, so I didn't.

We took the long bus ride to the Sahara and checked into my friend's beautiful guest house in the town of Merzouga. The guest house was a family run place filled with beautiful rugs and pottery. We were welcomed with dates and camel milk and settled into the interior to escape the oppressive heat of the day and rest after the long journey. It was the farthest her mom or sister-in-law had ever been away from Sefrou.

We took a small excursion to a nearby village and when we returned it was time for the preparations to begin. Women began to arrive with the jewelry and costumes my wife needed for the ceremony. Hanane was dressed in a white gown with heavy metal jewelry(literally heavy jewelry made of metal) that could easily have been used to kill. Her hair and makeup were done with care. A final touch was a woven cloth bag which they placed over her entire head and tied with a ribbon. I'm not kidding. It's traditional for the bride to arrive with a burlap sack over her head.

As for me, I fared better, I was wrapped up in djellaba and crowned

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

with a turban so only my eyes were still showing. After we'd been prepared, we were led outside to the courtyard where we sat on comfortable cushions while Berber musicians played desert music for our pleasure.

In a traditional Berber wedding, the bride has her head covered when seen by anyone for three days. During this time, the bride and groom sit in desert tents while henna, music, dancing, and feasting take place at the homes of the families. We reduced the burlap sack time to about 45 minutes at which point Hanane had the bag removed from her head and my face was unwrapped. We danced and sang. The music and dancing were spectacular and the Berber's treated us as their own family. When we moved inside, we were set behind a table lit with dozens of candles while everyone danced and sang to the live music.

Our hands were gently tied together and we once again fed each other dates and camel milk. There were no vows, no moment of 'You may now kiss the bride,' but I kissed her anyway. If her father had been there, that wouldn't have been possible. There's no kissing in front of the father, ever. In fact, the shut the television off if people are kissing on it and he is in the room.

We didn't stay up all night, after all, we aren't disco people. We retired to our room and left the guests behind to enjoy themselves while we did the same.

The next day we journeyed to see desert foxes and Gnawa musicians in a traditional Gnawa village. The Gnawa are the descendants of black African slaves who brought their own traditions with them and evolved their music into that for which Morocco is most famous. It is the original trance music and is often used for ecstatic ritual and dance because of its heavy bass and hypnotic rhythm. We danced, sang, and I learned to play on the Gnawa guitar.

In the evening, the Berber women again came to the guest house. They covered Hanane in henna. Henna is used throughout the Arab and Indian worlds to ward off evil spirits and to celebrate days of joy. The patterns of the henna deflect the evil eye. Henna is a green or brown mud made from the henna plant which stains the skin with tattoo-like patterns. My wife, like most Arab women, loves henna. She loves it more than most.

With the henna drawn it was time for us to head into the desert. Our guides arrived with two trains of camels and we mounted as the sun was starting to sink beneath the dunes. Through the moonlight we wound our way through the golden sand of the Sahara singing traditional Arab and Berber songs. My bride in her white shift, flowers in her hair, and henna

VAGO DAMITIO

drying on her arms and feet was a true princess of the desert as she sat upon her camel as the moon rose over the magical and mysterious Sahara.

We rode in caravan through the night to a small oasis next to a massive dune. The guides set up nomad tents and brought out small tables, cushions and everything we needed to be comfortable. They prepared a tasty desert meal for us and we began to enjoy the stars, the tajine, and the serenity of being away from civilization. As my Arab princess snuggled in my arms under the stars and smiled up into my eyes, I had to ask myself if it was possible any of this was real.

In the morning, we woke with the sun. Hanane donned a white western wedding gown my mother had sent while I put on a black and gray striped Djellaba and slippers Hanane had bought for me. We quietly exchanged vows in the sand dunes and smiled happily at one another. We kissed in front of the world (because her father wasn't there and everyone else was sleeping otherwise it would have been hshuma.) This, was the wedding we had dreamed about together. As the rest of our wedding party woke and prepared to return to the world, I carried her across the sands and placed her on the back of her camel. I once again found it hard to believe this was my life.

The Sahara is beautiful as the dunes awake and the desert life prepares for the scorching hot temperatures soon arrive with the sun. It was magnificent to turn and share smiles with the love of my life as we rode sure footed camels in caravan with trusted nomad friends.

It was like a fairy tale or a story from the *1001 Nights*.



SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

TURKEY AT LAST

Turkey had been on my radar for a long time. When I'd met that dervish back in 1995, I decided to someday visit Turkey. In 2003 when I was slaving away as a stockbroker, some guy who trusted me with millions of dollars of assets told me "You don't belong behind that desk, you should be running some guesthouse on the banks of the Bosphorus."

I'd been planning to leave Hawaii and end up in Turkey but I'd been sidetracked in Morocco. I'd become married, employed, and every kind of turned around. Finally, though, I was going to Turkey. I found out Turkey didn't require a visa for Hanane. I had to get one, but she could get on a plane and go with nothing but a passport. Turkey would be our honeymoon trip and since we were going, I was going to look for jobs and see if I could drag my wife away from her annoying family influences.

I bought the tickets and I began making inquiries at English schools at the same time, figuring I could visit the schools while we visited the country. We flew into Istanbul and stayed for one night before heading across the Marmara Sea to Bursa. From Bursa we took a bus to Manisa where I had an interview with a language school. My wife came along. Much to our surprise, we were both offered jobs! We accepted and continued on to explore Ephesus, Selcuk, Fetiye, Cappadocia, Ankara and then we returned back to Istanbul for the last few days of our honeymoon. I've been to many places but Istanbul is, in my opinion, the most magnificent city in the world.

We returned to Morocco, closed up our house in Fez, and I caught another flight to Turkey. Hanane would stay in Morocco through Ramadan and join me a month later. While she fasted with her family, I was on my way to get our lives ready for a new country and a new life.

Anytime your material situation and mental situation both improve, you must be making some right decisions and the universe is validating your parking. Leaving Morocco was hard. I had to deal with my flight

VAGO DAMITIO

being canceled, extreme heat, flight delays, and getting bit by thousands of insects on my forearms while on the train to Casablanca. I haven't figured out if that was fleas, gnats, or hives. I didn't see anything. The last days I spent in Morocco were challenging. It was hard to leave.

In Turkey, everything flowed like a lazy river. It was effortless. Everything worked perfectly. The house the school put us in was an upgrade from our apartment in Fez. Not only furnished, but the teacher who had recently moved out of the room I moved into left behind a closet full of clothes in my size. He also left behind a stack of Malaysian and Taiwanese banknotes I changed them at the bank for \$100. Moving in bonus. I should have wondered why he left in such a hurry.

The job was easy, the pay was decent, my colleagues were nice. I shared the house with a slobby American who was leaving the next month to go somewhere else. He was a 23 year-old hippie from Maine. This was his first job after college. He had long blond hair and blue eyes, stood tall and thin, played guitar in a local bar, and should have been getting laid left and right. I think he hadn't figured out he could do that yet. He was spacey and lazy. When he created garbage, he left it where it sat on the table, the floor, his nightstand, the sofa, or anywhere else. To me that suggested a lazy brain. He was moving on to a new job when his one year contract was complete a few weeks later.

I worked with an angry young English woman who gave me lots of warnings about the school screwing her over, being late with payments, and forcing her to work more than she agreed to. Two days after I arrived, she was canned.

The most interesting person I met in Manisa was a black South African who has worked in television production and taught English in South America, Africa, and in Turkey. He'd been to every continent and had the grinning happy-go-lucky attitude of those who don't stress out about life. He was an intensely positive person and I was sad to hear he was going to Argentina at the end of the month.

My roommate invited them to the apartment for a pancake dinner party after I cleaned up the kitchen. I had to wonder if he would have invited them if the kitchen was still so disgusting. His mom had sent him bisquik, maple syrup, and marshmallow creme from Maine.

The roommate was a strange one. He came to Europe after he graduated and took a TEFL course in Greece. He couldn't find a job in Greece, so he went to Amsterdam for a week and spent all of his money getting stoned before returning to Greece. Once in Greece he had no money to get to Turkey where he'd found the job in Manisa. He'd brought a huge stack of books about the Greece, his guitar, and two huge

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND
bags filled with his clothes. He and my wife came from the same school of packing.

All that stuff made it hard to travel but he managed to beg a train ticket to Istanbul but arrived at the border with no money for the visa. He found some nice Canadians who paid it for him. In Istanbul he busked on the streets, before coming to Manisa and moving into a nice apartment he proceeded to fill with trash he was too lazy to take to the dumpster. I'm incredibly scornful of traveling with that much crap and being such a stupid fucking hippie as to smoke away his money in Amsterdam and then to have to leech from strangers. He wouldn't have made it to Manisa except his mom wired him more money while he was living on the streets in Istanbul.

I didn't want to live with him. I was glad he was leaving a month later. He was a nice guy. I don't want you to think I didn't like him personally, I just don't like to be around people who live that way. I especially don't want to live with them.

As to the Turks I was working with. There was a small, mild mannered, pleasant guy who was the head of English teachers at the British Culture school. He offered to help with anything I need help with but I didn't trust him because he had incredibly shifty eyes as he answered my questions.

The head of teachers at the American Culture school was a skinny Turkish woman who wore too much makeup and constantly smoked cigarettes. She had a gravelly voice, laughed a lot, and according to the foreign teachers, she was the sister of the devil. I didn't get that at all. In fact, I liked her. A Moroccan meeting her would find her whorish because of the makeup and smoking. Women in Morocco don't smoke, if they do, everyone assumes they are whores. I didn't think she was a particularly trustworthy person, but I liked her none the less, maybe because of that. I didn't think she was the devil. She was funny and pleasant.

The other female teachers were like less mercenary versions of her. Heavy makeup, and gravely voices from smoke and drink. I was struck by how good looking the Turks are as a people. Turks are good looking. A combination of Arab, Byznatine, Cossack, Mongolian, and European stocks add up to some amazing features. The most striking of my students was a 15-year-old who already had an eye-popping figure and looked both Hindi and European at the same time. Her eyes were the most remarkable green and her mouth was wide and filled with perfect teeth.

Turks are amazingly helpful. When I went looking for a bottle of

VAGO DAMITIO

wine, a patron from the store I was looking for it in, walked with me to the shop where I could get it. He asked for nothing in return and simply wanted to make sure I found it. This kind of thing happens a lot in Turkey. Turkey feels safe, no matter what time of day. I was never subjected to 'Bonjour' 'Hello' 'Where are you from?' 'Where are you going?' aggressive tout phrases that assaulted me on any venture outdoors in Morocco unless I went to strictly tourist areas. Even then, the hustle was far less intense than in Morocco. I felt good in Turkey. I felt happy. I felt relaxed and content.

I worried about that. I pondered the fights with Hanane, the stress I felt when I was with her, and the utter state of not being relaxed around her. I wondered if it was a result of Morocco, her, her family or a combination of all of it. I wanted to continue feeling this at ease about our life together. I didn't know if that would continue when she arrived.

A week before Hanane arrived, the whole situation began to fall apart. It was the roommate's fault. Instead of finishing his contract and giving the school time to find another foreign teacher, he decided to leave without notice in the middle of the night. He told me he was going and laughed about how he was screwing the school.

"Did they screw you?" I asked.

"No," he said. "They screwed my friends."

Suddenly, I was the only Native English speaking teacher. Guess who was saddled with every class that had been the British girls or the American hippie's. Yup. It was me.

My life went from easy to stressed overnight. Then, Hanane arrived and brought a whole bundle of extra stresses. I was asked to take on five more classes with no more pay. My two days off disappeared and I no longer had time to enjoy myself. This was exactly when Hanane arrived. She found me stressed out and being used. She started off being on the defensive in regards to the school. I'd managed to get a residence permit but the school told her she needed to wait for a month or two. That hadn't been part of the original agreement. The original deal was they would get us residence permits upon our arrival, but they wanted to make sure we were going to stay before they invested any further time or money in us.

I took a hard line about taking on new classes, about getting insurance, and about everything else because since the roommate left, I was getting screwed. Next, the director of the school told me we had to pay bills out of pocket - again, not part of the original deal. Next, he shut the internet down in the house and told us to get dongles instead. Things were going from bad to worse very quickly.

I told them we were quitting. We weren't stuck there. At this point

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

they agreed to pay half the utilities, stabilized my workload, and promised to get moving with a resident permit for Hanane. The damage was already done. Hanane had arrived to complete uncertainty and from that point forward, she wanted to go back to Morocco. She never trusted the school and as for me, I was so pissed about the whole situation I became a walking time bomb. The job was good. I liked the students. I liked the other teachers. I didn't like the hours or the director.

The students were hard working but they were clueless about the most basic grammar despite being moved up in classes to keep them paying. It was a business and no one cared the students didn't know the difference between a verb and a particle. The good news was I had no shortage of class topics and since these were mostly adults, they were receptive to learning. They learned quickly and I began to wonder what the other foreign teachers had been teaching them. When I asked, I was told they showed movies or had discussions about their personal problems.

Of course the young ones who were having their parents pay for the classes preferred breaks over lessons. None of these students bothered to bring books to class. I showed them films.

When I told some of the Turkish teachers I was teaching grammar and they were shocked. "Really?" they asked, "But why?"

Meanwhile the shenanigans with the administration continued. They told me I was going to have to work an extra seventy hours per month with no pay raise. Once again, I said no, but I was becoming far less polite about it. And so it went...

As Hanane's 3-month tourist visa came ready to expire, I continued to pressure them about her residence permit. They had done nothing. Hanane cried at night when she talked on Skype with her mom. She asked me if she was going to be deported and barred from coming back. I didn't know.

I bought her a round trip ticket back to Morocco. We would give her a visa run and she could spend a few weeks visiting with her family. It had been three months since she arrived. With that, she became happy again. I hadn't known how stressed out she was about the visa and how much she missed her family. Her dad had taken ill. She was worried and she was homesick.

I told the administration she was leaving for a month to renew her visa. They said okay. A few days later, we discovered Hanane was pregnant, so the trip back to her mom's was doubly welcomed. We were both excited and happy.

Two weeks later, I was called into the office and told Hanane couldn't take a break. They didn't have a teacher to cover for her. I had classes at

VAGO DAMITIO

the same time as her classes.. They claimed they had hired new teachers but they wouldn't arrive on time to fill in. They said they would get her a residence permit in the two days before her visa expired and that I should change the flight. I hadn't bought a changeable ticket; plus Hanane was looking forward to spending time at home; plus she was pregnant; plus I couldn't cancel her trip without her freaking out. I told the administration all of these concerns.

A few hours later, I was called into the office by the head manager - "Kamel (the owner) wants me to tell you that you and Hanane are both fired." She didn't bother saying "Merry Christmas." Fired and evicted. Just like my father, the Nit-picker had done only this time with a pregnant wife at Christmas. It was hard to believe I'd been so happy three months earlier.

I kissed Hanane and sent her through airport security. I told her everything was going to be alright. She was on her way back to Morocco and I would figure out what to do about our life. It would work out. Having her safely back with her family took a huge amount of pressure off me.

The first thing I did was file complaints against the school. I contacted the other foreign teachers who had worked illegally, been screwed, and been either fired or left in the night. It turned out I was the only foreign teacher who had ever received a residence permit. None of us were given working permits. Every foreign teacher to ever work there, had worked illegally.

I managed to get meetings with the Department of Education, I wrote complaints, I requested an inspection be scheduled, and I submitted evidence of having been lied to, paid illegally, and employed illegally despite the promises on my contract. The contract, by the way, said we would be given housing, pay, health insurance, a working permit, and a residence permit. I went through every process I needed to go through to stick it to the school. I posted notices online in every forum and English teaching site about the lies and scams of the school.

I'm certain it ended up costing them more than it would have to honor our agreement, but ultimately the school is still there and all the complaining in the world didn't change the fact that I still didn't have a job. I was added to a 'Do Not Hire' list in schools throughout Turkey that were associated with the one I'd left. Funny enough, I was approached by a couple of the school headmasters who offered to hire me anyway - but for reduced pay.

I was also offered jobs from other companies but in every case the situations was similar to the one I'd left. No work permit and no

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

guarantee of fair treatment. I spoke with a recommended school in Antalya and when I went to interview with them, I found they were pulling the same old scam. In Izmir, I found a professional English school which promised me a great wage, benefits, and full time work. I needed to wait for their new semester to begin in mid-January.

Mid-January came and I went round to the school to find out what my schedule was like. It was then they told me they were a new school and didn't have enough students for a full-time schedule but I could work nine hours per week until everyone learned they had an American teacher and enrollments picked up. Different scam, different scammers.

About that time, I won a round trip flight from Malaysia to South Korea on a blog contest that asked why I would like to go to South Korea. My video was about kimchi. It won. I booked a flight to Malaysia in March. English teaching wasn't working. It was time I began focusing on developing my career as an online travel journalist. I'd been keeping my travel blog as a hobby for years. I earned a modest amount and I figured if I made the plunge and dedicated myself - perhaps I could support my little family with it. It was the best option I had.

With that decision made, I left the world of Turkish English schools behind and caught a train to Bulgaria while I waited for my flight to Malaysia in March.



I fell in love with these drunk Americans on the train to Sophia.

VAGO DAMITIO

VAGABOND TRAIN

Leaving Istanbul was like leaving home. I fell in love with Istanbul and Turkey. Without warning, sadness filled me as I left this magnificent city that delights the eyes, mind, body, and soul. My 'good' clothes and another bag with the rest of Hanane's possessions sat in the basement of my friend's Istanbul hotel, so meant I was coming back.

I had a flight to catch from Istanbul to Malaysia at the end of the month. And then another flight from Istanbul to North Africa when I returned. Like friends and those we love, for Istanbul it is only ever a 'see you later.' That helps when I do leave her.

I was boarding an overnight train from the former Constantinople to Sofia, Bulgaria. Not only was Bulgaria new and unknown to me, I had a sleeper berth on a leg of the old Orient Express. There was something incredibly exciting and fun about that. The cost of the ticket was less than I expected...about 30 euros including the berth in the sleeper.

The train looked old. As if it had come out of a Soviet Republic. I admit I knew nothing about Bulgaria before going there. I posted I was going into the former USSR as a Facebook status update, a friend pointed out I was wrong. It was a former Eastern Block country. A former communist state. I suppose that excuses my American ignorance...that and the fact I am American. I don't think Cuba is in Australia or Asia. That puts me ahead of the curve.

An American couple was in the cabin next to the one I shared with a Bulgarian mountaineer returning from Nepal. He lived in Seattle. He told me Nepal was the most disgusting place he had ever visited. The American couple were getting smashed in the next compartment and I heard one of them crash down from the bunks to the deck. At the 3 am border crossing, they stumbled to the tiny duty free stall and carried back what looked like a big bottle of whiskey. When we arrived at the border the Turkish engine detached while we went through a relatively painless customs procedure. The conductor had to pound on the door of their

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND
compartment to wake the Americans. This was, of course, before they went to the duty free for more whiskey.

The two hour wait at the border was because we had to wait for the Bulgarian engine to come to us. We made a stop in Plovdiv where the conductor spent ten minutes waking the Americans next door. They staggered out with their clothes hanging on them the wrong way. As I had gone to sleep in the early morning, I heard them having progressively more slurred conversation. Something like "Just because you fell, doesn't mean you can't be proud of getting up there, I mean you did it."

I loved those two drunk Americans like I've never loved American tourists before. Getting shitfaced on a night train from Istanbul to Plovdiv. I didn't talk with them because I was afraid it would spoil the nice spell they had charmed me with. When they staggered past to get off the train at Plovdiv, the man, who looked like Johnny Depp said "Hi" to me in the drunkest of tones and the smell of bourbon wafted up to please my senses. The woman looked like Julie Delphi with a terrible hangover. I took their picture as they looked around the platform completely confused and the train chugged away.

We arrived in Sofia about three hours late at 1:30 pm. The train station was freezing and the effect of having Ceyrillic alphabet around me provided that giddy feeling of culture shock I both love and hate. I felt completely disoriented. My phone didn't work in Bulgaria, but Bulgaria has the decency to put free WiFi in the train station. Sitting in the cold station, I found my Couchsurfing host and called him with Skype. You have to love technology.

He told me to get a cab to his house from down the road instead of using one from the train station since the guys at the station would rip me off. The cab was three Euro and took me to his door. In my pocket was the drunk American girl's hat which I'd spotted in their cabin and kept as a souvenir. It was fluffy and blue. I gave it to Hanane later. She disapproved of the drunkenness but approved of the hat. She still has it. I wonder if someday Julie Delphi will see her and say "I once had a hat just like that."

One of the interesting coincidences about my host in Sofia was he worked with a magazine called Vagabond. He had recently left Vagabond to start a staffing company which finds Bulgarians and other Eastern Europeans jobs in Western countries. He set up a meeting for me with the Vagabond editors. I was excited to meet them.

My host and I hit it off immediately. He had me watch a video about Sofia, then we went for a long walk through communist parks, into a

VAGO DAMITIO

communist hotel, and past the great sites we'd seen in the video. Along the way, we mostly ignored the sites and talked about what had brought us away from the USA, how we liked the countries we lived in, what we wanted from life, and how strange it was to see the old communist relics.

Back at his place we had a delicious Bulgarian meal of chicken and potatoes and drank Bulgarian wine with his beautiful Bulgarian girlfriend and her beautiful Bulgarian friends. I learned about Bulgarian traditions, Bulgarian monsters, and Bulgarian customs. Did I mention Bulgarian women are beautiful?



SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

PERNIK -A BRISK WINTER WALK

Travel to the places that don't make it into most magazines or guidebooks is much more interesting and exciting than reading about Bali or Boracay from yet another person who has 'discovered' it. Certainly I didn't discover Pernik, but it was a pleasure to get to see it in this way. One of the girls I'd met in Sofia had called it Mordor, like the waste in The Lord of the Rings.

I woke bright and early to go for a walk with a new Bulgarian friend's grandfather to the forest. He was much more bright eyed than me but one thing I figured out quickly is Balkan people can drink day and night and seem to not suffer from it at all.

As for me, I suffer. The sidewalk was icy and it was C-O-L-D but that didn't stop the 82-year-old man in front of me from being the first one down the street, the first one up the hill, and the first one to wherever he was leading us. The one doing the leading should go first.

He led us past nuclear reactors and over the river. We crossed the road and went up among the gypsy houses and gypsy dogs. These were kind, simple, and humble people. Their apartment was anything but luxurious but filled their needs. That's why when we arrived at the massive house they live in during the summer, I was so surprised. It was gorgeous. Decorated like a boutique hotel, each room designed with a different flavor. In the basement, the canned preserves, the still, and the big vats of wine sat waiting to be poured into old coke bottles.

The weather was turning worse. We took a winding path through trees and down icy trails. No one fell, but if they had I would have remembered that the funniest thing in the world is the confused look on people's face when they realize they are no longer standing up. Even if it was me.

Finally, our historic guide decided to go back home where it was warm. He asked his grandson, my friend, to complete the tour by showing me the various monuments and statues in the town of Pernik.

VAGO DAMITIO

We did see those but given the blue faces we had, we deemed it best to duck into a cafe and grab some coffee. We visited the old church, the statue of the town protector, the old mining building, and some other statues and monuments the cold weather made impossible for me to remember.

After that we went back to his grandparents for lunch with his aunt and while there was some rakia, I declined (which I hadn't done the night before). My head couldn't take it.



SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

THE SERBIAN

Leaving a country you like is a crap shoot. If you think about it, it's like being at a party where you're having a great time and you hear about another party and decide to go check it out. It might be the ultimate raging party or it might be lame. That's how it is when you leave someplace where you've had a fantastic experiences to see somewhere new. I'd heard Belgrade was an amazing city. I'd heard it was like Paris but undiscovered. I'd heard it was beautiful, sophisticated, and cultural. When I looked for a Couchsurfing host, a guy came up on the couch request board and offered to let me stay at his place.

I was stoked on what Serbia promised. My host had amazing references from all over the world. I'd heard great stories about the capital and the people. I was told how great the food was, how beautiful the women were, and how fantastic the nightlife was. Great. I was heading to Serbia.

To go to Belgrade, Serbia I had to leave Sofia, Bulgaria; a city that had welcomed me with great friends, exciting experiences, fantastic night life, plenty to do, and an overall great vibe. Hard to leave, but sometimes you have to take the chance if you want to ever see something new.

My host considered going with me but at the last minute decided it wouldn't work because of some scheduled appointments he would have to rush back for. I stepped on the bus and the ride started off positively when I met a Serbian woman who was on her way back from a ski trip in Bulgaria. As the first Serbian I'd met, she was about as MILF as MILF gets. If you don't know what MILF means, use Google. She worked in the government and fought against corruption, an interesting and beautiful woman. She was anxious to get home to her husband and daughter but had just taken a much needed break in Bulgaria with friends.

She too, told me about the great Serbian food, how the Serbian

VAGO DAMITIO

women were the most beautiful in the world, and about how Serbia had saved the world several times during wars by stopping the Ottomans. It was easy to believe coming from her. At our first stop we drank coffee and then we transferred buses in Nis and went on to Belgrade.

Around 9:30 pm we pulled to Belgrade and to be honest, once I said goodbye to her, everything in Serbia went downhill. I tried to follow the spastic directions to the house of my host. Along the way, I was surrounded by a pack of wild dogs. It was icy and I was walking through a park and suddenly I heard dogs to the left. Then dogs behind me yipping. Next I heard dogs to my right. Finally, in front of me a big bitch German shepherd moved to block my path. There were at least ten dogs around me. I moved towards the bitch trying not to show alarm. She growled as I moved closer but I kept going. Finally, she moved aside and I walked away. I heard the dogs behind me but kept my back stiff and didn't look back.

Two blocks later I found a cafe and moved inside. Fuck, I never expected my life to end being torn apart by dogs in Belgrade, Serbia, but it sure felt like it was going to happen. I found my host's house. Going inside, I was disappointed because it didn't live up to the reviews. It was a pigsty. Incredibly filthy. The couch I was shown to was covered with food crumbs and dog hair. My host wasn't there, but his room mate was. He offered me Serbian coffee and rakia, the plum liquor Serbs drink day and night. He was a nice guy and we fell into an easy conversation about politics. He was the first but not the last Serbian to tell me he hated Americans. He was also the first, but not the last Serb, to suggest I was a spy. We drank until 1 am when I lay down on the dirty couch.

Just as sleep was coming, my actual host returned and he was as loud as his house was filthy. Loud, overbearing, unable to take the hint it was past 1 am. and I was exhausted, and also quite happy to tell me about how he hated Muslims, America, and Americans. I had made no secret about the fact all three applied to me. I should point out what I consider to be the essentials in the host/guest relationship whether it is through couch surfing, friends, or business. If you are going to host someone - provide them with a clean place to sleep, keep your bathroom clean, be sensitive to the travel fatigue of your guest, and it's in bad form to insult the national origin, religion, or home country of your guest. Being host is not the same as being the boss. Allow your guest a chance to set their own agenda if they choose to.

As a guest there are also responsibilities. Clean up after yourself, be respectful of your host's space, be sensitive to the energy level of your host, avoid insulting their religion, nationality, or character, and allow

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

your them to show you what makes their city special if they want to. I don't know who left such great feedback for this particular host (and a lot of people had) but he was one of the worst hosts I've everhad. He was a nice guy in many ways, but everything from the hairy bed to the filthy toilet to his domineering attitude was pushing me into an unpleasant place.

In the morning, another of his roommates and I went to the market to get food to cook breakfast. When we returned, the host and another guest from Poland were already eating! They had known we were planning to make breakfast for everyone. Our host had already planned out the day for us without regard for what we might have wanted to do. It was a good plan, but it would have been nice to have been asked.

Things began badly for me in Serbia. Getting surrounded by a pack of wild dogs, my hosts telling me how much they hated American's and Muslims, and being accused (jokingly) of being a spy put me at odds Serbia as a whole. Even though my host, the Serbian, rubbed me the wrong way, the fact is he was doing his best to introduce his country, show me some interesting sites, and provide a bed to strangers in the best of hospitable traditions.

The handful of Serbs in his house were interested to hear the history of Hawaii and how it was stolen from the Hawaiian people by imperialist American missionaries. Obviously, I've left my country and as I've stated in the past, I'm not a fan of the unbridled military industrial complex, unconditional support of Israel, or the empty culture of consumption, waste, work, and die which the United States has spawned throughout the entire world. I understood why they hated Americans, but I found it to be difficult to enjoy my time with someone who repeatedly said they hated my country and countrymen.

I have never lived in a country that was bombed the United States and her NATO allies. I didn't spend my teen years wondering why my friends were killed by U.S. bombs or looking at schools destroyed by NATO, or wondering why Muslims and Christians were continually slaughtering each other in the Balkan wars of the 1980's and 1990's. Understanding that, helps to understand the scarred psyche of the Serbian people, in particular those who spent their teen years in complete and total hell.

Even so, Serbs are difficult to sympathize with. Like Israelis, they tend to be in your face about the righteousness of their country and their actions. Serbia doesn't recognize Albania, Croatia, Bosnia, Kosovo or any of the other countries that have splintered from the former Yugoslavia. To Serbs there are no Croats, no Kosovars, no Albanians, no Bosnians. Only Serbs pretending to be something they are not. My host

VAGO DAMITIO

was surprised I was offended by jokes where Hitler is using Jews as pieces of a Tetris game as he throws them off the cliffs. I told him the only Hitler jokes I want to hear are ones where Hitler ends up dead and humiliated, but most of his 'dark' Serbian humor cast Hitler as a good guy.

Incredibly offensive. When I asked him to stop with the Hitler jokes, he wanted to tell me dead baby jokes. I stopped him before he could begin. I don't laugh about dead babies. I don't laugh about genocide. I don't laugh about racism. Finally, he asked what kind of joke I wanted and I suggested an American joke. This led to one that did make me laugh.

Slobadan Milosevic and Bill Clinton were meeting in Washington once and Bill Clinton left the room for the moment but warned Slobadan not to push a red button. Of course Slobadan pushed it and a hand came out and slapped him in the face.

Milosevic vowed revenge and several months later the same scenario unfolded in Belgrade. Milosevic left the room and warned Clinton not to push the button. Clinton pushed it but nothing happened so he pushed it again and again.

A few minutes later Slobadan came back in the room and said the talks were over. He asked Bill Clinton where he would go. Clinton said he would go home to the USA.

Slobadan laughed and replied "What USA?"

Hitler jokes aside, we did have a nice day. We watched funny Yugo commercials from the 1980's and then we piled into my host's old Opel only to get out again to push start it. We piled in again and set out for the mountain where the Serbs have rebuilt the TV tower that NATO forces blew up during the Balkan war. With slick bottomed shoes that had a few holes in them, I wasn't quite prepared to hike up an icy mountain, but armed with two massive bottles of beer, that was the plan.

As we climbed and I kept looking back to see my host sliding and falling. That didn't stop him from shouting orders to me about how I was climbing the wrong way and how I should change my technique. I did my best to ignore him as he heaved himself up the hill out of breath.

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

SKULL TOWERS AND CONCENTRATION CAMP VICTIMS

Travel is about gaining perspectives and points of view that broaden your experience and while I've never had any overt desire to visit a Nazi Concentration Camp, when I found out there was one in Nis, it was somewhere I knew I should visit.

The camp was called the Red Cross Concentration Camp (Crveni Krst in Serbian) which sent a mixed message, much the way Serbs do when they welcome me and then tell me how much they hate Americans. I never had the sense the Serbs I met hated me, but in their rhetoric I sometimes heard a blind hatred that included me and that, was most disturbing.

To get to the camp, I had to walk the opposite direction from the famous tower of skulls. It was cold in either direction and the scenery was like a depressing Soviet era film about life in the Gulag. Knowing I was heading to a concentration camp didn't do anything to raise my level of happiness, still, I was curious what it was like. As I moved closer, I felt a cold wind blowing outside the walls of the camp. It was also blowing inside of me as I considered the atrocities of the Nazi regime.

The camp was built by the Nazis occupying Yugoslavia during World War II. Coming closer and seeing the swastika, barbed wire, and guard tower- I felt chills as I pondered of the way human beings are able to kill each other. I've spoken with killers before and they say it becomes easier each time and soon, it's like anything else. Butchers, and hunters claim the same thing. Incredibly disturbing.

I walked in. I was ignored by everyone there (about five people). I went to the ticket office, but it was empty. It felt wrong to buy a ticket to a concentration camp anyway. I found some maintenance guys and a stunning Serbian girl eating some borek and I shrugged my shoulders as in "Hey, am I supposed to pay?" The girl came over and in halting English told me "Just go in, pay ticket later."

VAGO DAMITIO

I went in. I found three American Missionaries from Missouri. A husband and wife who are missionaries in Macedonia and the wife's father, a retired Army pastor. The lady who sold tickets was giving a tour and the American missionary woman was translating.

This particular concentration camp was the site of a heart warming story that was uplifting and inspiring. In 1942, an armed revolt led to the largest escape from any concentration camp during the entire war. The escapees were mostly not Jewish however, which makes the story less uplifting for some reason. They were guerrillas from Josip Broz Tito's independence movement. They had been captured by German forces during the Battle of Kozara. The escape was immortalized in a film by Miomir Stamenkovic called Lager Nis (another name for the camp) in 1987.

Of the 30,000 people who went through this camp, it's estimated 12,000 of them were executed at nearby Bubanj. Many of the others (especially those who were Jewish or Gypsy) were sent to the other death camps and so perished. This camp was mostly filled with Serbian communists.

Later in the day, I wandered to another grim Serbian attraction: a tower made of human skulls. The Serbs had caused problems in the Ottoman Empire and began a rebellion in Nis which sits on the Constantinople Road running through Sofia, Bulgaria, to modern day Istanbul. The 1809 rebellion was crushed by the Ottomans and the skulls of the rebels were used to build a tower as a reminder to anyone else who wanted to rise up against Sultan Mahmud II.

Like all of Serbia, I found the Skull Tower to be creepy. To get there I had to walk two kilometers from the center of Nis. The ever present dog turds and graffiti tagging were constant while the sidewalks were not. Along the way, I stopped to eat the Serb delicacy borek. It's a filo dough pastry stuffed with cheese or meat. It was greasy, but delicious. I bought a yogurt to wash it down while sitting in a grungy park with some senior citizens who had no idea what to think of me joining them as they ate their boxed lunches.

At the tower, there was no signage. I walked around it, took some pictures of the external chapel, but the doors were locked so I couldn't get inside. By this time, the borek and yogurt had caused my bowels to rebel like Serbs under Ottoman rule and I needed to find a toilet. So despite my desire to see the tower of skulls, I went towards a dirty bus station nearby to see if I could find a place to stomp out the rebellion in my guts. At the bus station, the lady asked me if I wanted to see the tower. I explained I needed a toilet first, but yes, I wanted to see it.

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

She was a tiny dwarf of a woman who led me to the dirty bathroom (which I was happy to have access to) . I paid her the reasonable entrance fee of 100 Serbian Dinar (for the Skull Tower, not the dirty bathroom) and she then led me to the chapel of skulls where she pulled out a huge ring of keys and unlocked three locks to let me in. She watched curiously as I snapped photos. It felt like I expected, creepy

When 19th century traveler Alphonse de Lemartine visited Nis in 1833, this was his experience.

"My eyes and my heart greeted the remains of those brave men whose cut-off heads made the cornerstone of the independence of their homeland. May the Serbs keep this monument! It will always teach their children the value of the independence of a people, showing them the real price their fathers had to pay for it."



VAGO DAMITIO

DANCING MIDGETS AND THE RUSSIAN PROSTITUTE WHO LOVED ME

Have you ever watched a Federico Fellini film and thought 'This guy's imagination is so incredibly whacked - where does he get this stuff?' Or maybe you've watched old James Bond movies and guffawed because real life is never so ridiculously funny. If so, you've never been to the Balkans. In Serbia, I was accused of being a spy so many times I started to think of myself as one again. Agent 808 was back – at least for a night..

Serbia is filled with incredibly beautiful, long legged super model types that have eyes for anyone with a passport that can help them get out of there. The Balkans are loaded with gorgeous Bond girls and in Macedonia, I tapped into the secret headquarters of the World Bank.

I'd expected Skopje to be a poor, Balkan country filled with refugees from Kosovo, the Balkan Wars and the booming white slave trade in Bosnia and Herzegovina but instead....

Walking into Skopje was like walking into Palm Springs or some hip Colorado mountain town. The city was filled with chic boutiques, trendy bars, and cafes filled with well-maintained and beautiful people dangling Prada shopping bags from their arms. I'm not joking. Shopping is such a high priority in Skopje that they've made bronze statues of two leggy shoppers carrying luxury sacks.

I had absolutely no idea what was happening here, but the guys in suits whispering in corners and the high end cars whisking them around made me nervous. There was no way I could afford to stay in a town that catered to super-villains, businessmen and ultra rich super-shoppers. Within moments, I knew this was the most expensive night of my Balkan trip.

Skopje has a couple of claims to fame. It is the birthplace of Mother Theresa and is located near the birthplace of Alexander the Great. I'm sure there are other reasons this city is famous, but my probing didn't explain how this had become the Dubai of the Balkans.

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

I had to piece that story together myself.

I managed to find a hotel room for four times what I had paid for anything since I left Istanbul. It was a bargain because most of the hotels I looked at were in the 200 Euro range - even a dorm bed at the hostel was 40 Euro! What the hell was going on?

I found a cafe that wasn't blasting Euro-techno and offered free WiFi and I began doing some digging into the back story of Skopje, Macedonia. The answer wasn't clear at all, but here was what I was able to piece together.

During the Balkan wars, Macedonia managed to remain clear of the chaos that engulfed the rest of the region. In the aftermath, it was the logical stopping supply point for the UN's building of the new nation of Kosovo since it was friendly to the west and under no obligations to the Serbs to the north. As a result, it had become a banking center, a place for R&R for the UN troops, and a place where black market deals were brokered. A big part of the Kosovo development money went into building the infrastructure of Skopje. In the decades before, it had been a big communist project. In fact, Skopje had been planned to be the communist utopian city of the world. A famous Japanese architect came in and began construction on what was to be the world's perfect city - but then communism tumbled and Skopje was left, unfinished, unloved, and unclear about what to do.

In the 1990's and 2000's, the UN and NATO found it to be the perfect leaping-off point for a round of nation building. That brought in government money, the NGOs, and aid-worker's money. It became a place for leave and rest for NGO workers, UN diplomats, and NATO troops. Skopje was quick to embrace the chance to become something wonderful (once again) and quickly began a program of urban renovation, public works projects, arts (like the bronze shopping statues and countless others that grace the streets of Skopje), shopping malls, and international jazz festivals. Skopje has become a city like thousands of others in a place where it is like no other which makes Skopje a place that feels completely out of place in the world.

"Which NGO do you work with?" a French accented voice asked me.

I looked up from the computer and saw a smiling face with a big auburn mustache on it. Not a Turkish mustache or a biker mustache, not a trucker mustache but a meticulous auburn mustache that looked out of place on a face that looked too youthful to have that thick of a caterpillar on it.

The man held out his hand. "I'm sorry to interrupt you. I'm Gregor. Can I join you?"

VAGO DAMITIO

Alarms went off in my head. He was a hustler, an energy vampire, or a gay cruiser. I ignored the alarms. I was bored. His name didn't quite fit with the French accent in the same way his mustache didn't fit on his boyish face. It turned out I was wrong about all three of my guesses.

Gregor told me the following tale - I've no way of knowing if it were true or complete bullshit. His mustache, his accent and his back story may have been fake - but this was what he told me. His father had been a Soviet planner who came to Macedonia during the time of the utopia building. He'd fallen in love with a French woman, married her, and together they had brought Gregor into the world. The family had happily lived in Macedonia until his father was called away back to Mother Russia during the time when the Berlin wall had fallen and communism world-wide began to collapse. He and his mother never heard from his father again. She had taken them both back to her native France where he'd finished school and taken a job (this part was never clear - I tried to find out what his job was.)

Since adulthood, he'd been coming back to Macedonia, trying to find out about his father, reconnecting with childhood friends, and enjoying the hell out of himself. Gregor was a party-child and told me Skopje was the undiscovered party hot-spot in Europe. He offered to take me out and show me hidden nightlife. I was reluctant. I told him I needed to do some research on shopping in Skopje for an article I was writing for an in-flight magazine. My story was a lie, but I wanted to get away.

"If you change your mind, meet me back here at 9 pm." There was no pressure put on me. Just the offer and in fact, I liked this guy with his stories of friends who had gone to the dark side, his love of low-cost Russian prostitutes, and his big auburn mustache. I already knew I'd be meeting him.

He was sipping a coffee when I arrived and thus began a drunken night of Balkan discos, dancing, and a thousand new friends - none of whom I can picture clearly. We started with rakia and then moved into Red Bull and vodka. At some point we were putting back shots of vodka and shouting 'Nostroviya!' I'm not a disco person, but I admit it, this was fun.

We went from place to place gathering a larger crowd of friends with us as we moved along. Within a short time, I had begun intentionally spilling my drinks and dumping them halfway out when no one was looking. Even so, by 1 am. I was deliriously drunk -

I asked what time the bars close, he told me they didn't. I began to worry about the next day's hangover, but then another round came. At 2:30, I was face to face with a pouty lipped Russian blond and I

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

remember asking her question after question and her responses coming in a thick Russian and always followed by "I love you." Gregor translated her Russian to English. Mostly we spoke in mutually unintelligible English-Russian and always she ended with "I love you." It felt nice to be loved, but I was already taken. I remember her name to this day – Edna. The last name I would have guessed for a pouty lipped Russian prostitute. I asked Gregor what her job was, because I wasn't sure she did what I thought she did. He simply said "She works here in Skopje. Do you like her? She can go back to your hotel with you if you want." Which, to me, felt like his way of telling me she was a pro.

The last place we visited was the biggest dive of them all. Where the other places had gone for a disco or club vibe with pseudo wealthy decor, this place was old wood and rattan chairs, thick wood tables, and people crammed into a tiny space that looked like it had once been someone's garden shed before they put a bar up along the back wall. It was a gypsy bar.

I was reeling drunk I don't know what had happened to Edna but I found myself sitting at a tiny table with Gregor and three Macedonian guys with happy smiling faces without remembering how we had left the last bar.

"Look at that woman," one of them pointed to the most stunning woman I had seen in the Balkans. It wasn't just that I was drunk, this girl had movie star looks and as she danced there were at least six guys trying to move closer to her. None of them succeeded. She ignored everyone.

Actually, it wasn't true. She didn't ignore everyone. A tiny dwarf in heavy makeup was the only person the beauty danced with. The dwarf would have been beautiful had she not been a dwarf. The male dancers ignored the dwarf, moving away from her and the gorgeous woman ignored the male dancers who moved towards her. She moved constantly towards the dwarf.

"She's untouchable," Gregor said. "The beautiful one is there to tease but she will touch no one. She is unreachable."

This became the major topic of conversation at our table. It was a puzzle that danced before our eyes and it was true - despite the crowded dance floor, no one could dance with the beauty. It was Gregor who figured it out. "The dwarf is the key. If someone dances with the dwarf, the beauty will dance with him. They are a pair."

He stood to test the theory. We laughed as he twirled the dwarf around. People in the bar looked upset as he spoke with the dwarf. The two of them laughed and he lifted her up to a bar stool and stood beside her. She looked pleasant and I couldn't figure out why no one else had

VAGO DAMITIO

spoke with her, let alone danced with her. Gregor shrugged when I asked. "People are funny here in Macedonia."

It didn't look like he was going to get any closer to the beauty than the dwarf and it was definitely time for me to go back to my hotel. I said my goodbyes to Gregor and the dwarf.

As I turned to walk out the door, I felt a tap on my shoulder. One of the friends pointed back to where our Gregor was slowly dancing with his arms around the beauty. He had been right.

I found a cab outside and made it back to my hotel with no problems. By the way, here's a pro tip - when you check into a hotel, grab one of the business cards so later when you are drunkenly leaving a bar where midgets dance with beauties, you can simply hand the taxi driver the card with the address on it.

I woke at ten so I could catch a bus back to Sofia. I needed to get there in time to take the night train back to Istanbul in order to get a taxi to the airport on time so I could catch a flight to Casablanca, so I could catch a train to Fez, so I could take a taxi to Sefrou, so I could bring my pregnant wife a huge bouquet of flowers and some chocolates and wish her a happy Valentine's Day before I went back to Istanbul and then flew to Malaysia and South Korea. The hangover was gone by the time I arrived.



RETURNING TO ASIA – ALMOST AROUND THE WORLD

When I signed up for the contest to win a flight to South Korea, I didn't expect to win. That's why I was so surprised when I did. What a bonus to win a free flight from Malaysia to South Korea. Never mind that I was in Turkey...

I realized by the time I was in South Korea, I would be a short flight away from Japan and one flight away from Hawaii, but if you the reader, have forgotten, I hadn't forgotten my pregnant wife was waiting back in Morocco. While I'd managed to make this trip budget-friendly and was trying to use it and my experience through the Balkans earn an income to support my family with - a trip to Hawaii would be more than we could afford. I missed Hawaii so much, that to be honest, I was afraid I would get there and find excuses not to go back.

I bought a flight on Malaysia Airlines to Kuala Lumpur and booked my ticket from KL to Seoul and back. First of all, Air Asia X, who provided my free flight has, without a doubt, the sexiest flight attendants I've ever come across. Those tight mini skirt uniforms and the bright red color. Wow. I've often regretted living in an age when flight attendants are either 50, gay, or appearance challenged. Air Asia X said "Never mind the complaints about equality" and did something great. They've made flight attendants glamorous again. This alone makes air travel more bearable.

Inside the terminal were plenty of places to have coffee or lunch and the check-in process was easy and enjoyable to the eye, thanks to the cute employees they also have working at the desks. On board, the flight attendants were courteous, friendly, and flirty. The service was great and the on board meals were tasty and regionally oriented.

This was a strange trip from even before it began. When I won the round trip flight from Malaysia to Korea, I thought it was a reward for the hell we'd gone through with the school. Hanane would stay with her

VAGO DAMITIO

parents while I recharged my zest for life by wandering around Asia and seeing new countries. I thought I might even get some surfing in, visit old friends, make new friends, and find us new jobs in Korea or Malaysia. Cool. So I bought the ticket to Malaysia.

That was the beginning. Hey, I won a trip to Asia BUT then I found out my wife was pregnant, then we both became unemployed and homeless. Yeah, not the best way for a trip to begin.

The best course of action was for Hanane to stay in Morocco to spend some time with her family while I sorted my career out. I hoped I could make a go of travel writing. I had a couple of promising offers from Malaysia and Saudi Arabia for teaching jobs but the contracts were for three years and each time there was a problem in the conditions that made it unworkable. By the middle of January it was clear it was going to cheaper to simply go wandering around instead of renting a room while I waited for the trip to Asia at the end of February. Hanane wanted to be at her mom's place but I didn't want to be there. There was a part of me that said I should cancel the trip and go to Morocco but four points prevented me. I didn't have a job in Morocco, I'd paid for the tickets to Malaysia already, I'd already accepted the tickets to South Korea, and I'm selfish and greedy. I wanted to go on this trip. I admit it. Even if it meant my wife was pregnant and staying at her parent's house in Morocco.

She had been sponsored by the US State Department to take a course at the University of Oregon (online) for promising non-American teachers. The course was a big boon to her teaching resume and she needed to be somewhere where she could access the internet every day from early January until mid-March. Also, I made sure she had money, internet access, was regularly going to a good doctor, and taking her vitamins. We talked by Skype, Facebook, or other electronic means every day. I felt the entire time that I should have been with her, should have been providing her with a house of our own although later, when I did rent one, it sat empty while she stayed at her mother's.

From the Balkans, I made a mad dash to Morocco to surprise Hanane with Valentine's flowers and an eight day visit. She was still in the midst of her course so we didn't get as much time together as we wanted, but we did get to see each other and spend some time together. It made me happy to see the little snowball where her flat belly had been before.

Leaving Morocco, I took the cheapest means back to Istanbul which turned out to be RyanAir to Rome and then Pegasus Air to Istanbul. Less than \$150 U.S. total from Fez. Not bad.

In Istanbul, fortune smiled again and I landed a three month gig that provided a small apartment and decent pay when I returned from Asia.

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

At this point, the option was to sit in Morocco doing nothing or to take my trip, come back to Istanbul, earn some money, and have a chance to build a life in Turkey.

The problem was going to Asia by myself, knowing my wife was home pregnant, and knowing we didn't necessarily have any security for the near future. It didn't make me want to spend money on exotic adventures. Each time I considered spending more than a couple of dollars, I remembered my wife sitting pregnant at her parent's house where her back and body were sore from not being able to relax because of the changes of pregnancy. She didn't want to take exotic jungle treks, enjoy my time on Balinese beaches, or go out pubbing and clubbing with new friends while she was suffering. I didn't want to rub it in by blogging about it.

I did my best to make it an incredibly economical trip. In fact, it paid for itself in contacts, in business opportunities, and in cold hard cash. While I wasn't able to make it as short term profitable as the Balkan trip had been, I did succeed at what I set out to do. I managed to earn slightly more than I ended up spending during the time I traveled. I went to Malaysia, Korea, back to Malaysia, to Singapore, then to Indonesia, and back to Malaysia and back to Turkey for less than \$700 over 28 days. During that time, I had a lot of adventures, visited many cities, and ate a lot of delicious food.

What I didn't do was go to beach resorts, go out for big drinking nights, take multi-day jungle treks, or take any cultural courses in cooking, sport, or other things that I would normally have done. I avoided these essential experiences for a couple of reasons. I felt guilty about Hanane being at home and those experiences aren't as much fun when you are alone. Traveling solo when you are married can be a bummer.

I met a Swedish girl when I arrived at the hostel in Kuala Lumpur. She had been bit by monkeys, caught pneumonia, contracted conjunctivitis, and was sick with the flu. She was telling her horror stories and asked if I had any. I admitted I didn't. Like a curse, these words came out of her mouth "Someday you're going to get sick when you are traveling. You'll see, it's a total bummer."

Within 48 hours I was running a huge fever, hallucinating, and creating so much snot my body became dehydrated. For the rest of my trip, I was varying degrees of sick. Every time I felt better, I relapsed until one night in Indonesia, I believed I might die. I think it was dengue, but I don't know.

I didn't go to the hospital because as an American, medicine equates

VAGO DAMITIO

to thousands of dollars. As a result, I didn't quite have the same intrepid spirit as normal. I didn't have the energy to hike, hitch, or explore as much as I usually do. I didn't want to interact with strangers through couch surfing or host-stays or visit old friends. I didn't want to get other people sick.

For an average of \$25 per day including food, transport, airfare, visas, hotel/accommodation, and some entertainment I was able to explore a good sized chunk of Asia. That price, by the way, included buying presents for my wife and her family.



UNDERGROUND SEOUL

The Seoul Subway System. Seoul is a vibrant and historic city filled with amazing wonders, but you know what I loved and was amazed by the most while I was there? The Seoul subway system. I loved it. I know this is weird and I'm not sure if it is a leftover from those days when I built underground forts and secretly explore abandoned California goldmines with my childhood friends, but the scale and the majesty of the underground world in Seoul blew my mind.

And then there's the fact I love trains. A subway is, after all, a train. That's a part of it too. All I know is from the moment I went down to the subway at Incheon, I knew that I was experiencing something extraordinary. Down, down, down, and then not a city commute but a commute from another city in a mostly underground tunnel with an efficient system of giving a card but charging a deposit of 500 won and then returning the deposit when you arrive at your destination.

As you enter the subways in Seoul, you go down huge escalators and burrow into the bowels of the earth. You find more than trains down there. At Seoul Station you find an underground museum and at Gyeongbokgong you find a massive underground complex of culture. At Namdaemun and Dongdaemun there are underground shopping areas—one with bargain shops and one with modern luxury goods...both areas are bigger than any super-box store. I'm not talking about dinky caves with shops in them or big empty tunnels. I'm talking about an entire city underneath Seoul. A few of the unexpected discoveries I experienced underground in Seoul - restaurants, bathhouses (Jjimjilbangs), movie theaters, book stores, swap meets, museums, bars, karaoke, barber shops, and dentists.

I don't want to mislead you- there are plenty of magnificent experiences above ground in Seoul and the high rises are filled with beautiful examples of modern architecture, ultra modern shopping malls, and fantastic museums. But there is something astounding about an entire second city hidden beneath the surface connected by trains you

VAGO DAMITIO

don't see above. It's amazing to watch hordes of commuters, students, and families pouring into and out of the ground like ants. When you are down there, waiting at the platform - there are the vending machines. Ten types of hot coffee, plenty of cold drinks, snacks you've never heard of, and foods that look familiar but taste completely different. I love the underground soul of Seoul.



SOUTH KOREA'S EAST COAST

I knew I wanted to see more of South Korea than Seoul and following a random tip from a random American expat I met on the metro (see The Art of Conversation with Grumpy Expats in Part I), I decided to head to Sokcho. Not only did the expat recommend going to Sokcho, but she told me it was her favorite place in South Korea and recommended the great low-cost hotel I ended up staying in.

It's a couple of hours from Seoul by bus. As the bus arrived, I was astounded by the gorgeous mountain scenery of the place. I was clueless as to what to expect and I was surprised by the rapid descent to the Sea of Japan. Sokcho is located in Gangwon province and has a population of about 84,000. Despite this relatively small size, however, the city sprawls out for a fair distance in all directions. In the summer months it is a favorite holiday destination for people from Seoul, but in the winter it is a blissfully empty place.

In addition to the Sea of Japan and the nice beaches in Sokcho, there are a couple of other draws that bring people. One is Seoraksan National Park and the other is the extreme proximity of Sokcho to the DMZ between North Korea and South Korea. Arriving in Sokcho, I had no idea where my hotel was located in relation to the bus station and since the weather was nice, I decided to walk. Not knowing, at this point, the sprawling size of Sokcho, I picked the right direction to head by sheer luck. I walked along the beach enjoying the snow on the sands and the many odd fish sculptures along the sea shore. Sokcho is famous for fresh fish.

Leaving the beach, I walked towards a large iron bridge and noted thousands of fish drying on the roofs of every house I passed. When I see a big bridge like that, I know I should walk across it. That's what I did and I found myself in the most interesting little warren of streets and fish shops I had yet seen in South Korea. There was something different about this place but I couldn't put my finger on it. Later, I was to find out

VAGO DAMITIO

the island village I'd come to is called Abai and it is populated almost exclusively by refugees who escaped from Kim Jong Il's insane North Korea. The island of Abai is also famous because it was the setting for a Korean TV drama called "Autumn in My Heart." I've seen it dubbed into both Arabic and Turkish and have no doubt it exists in English as well.

While I was happy to be seeing this interesting place and still wondering why it felt so different, I wanted to find my hotel. I realized it was not on this odd island. After an hour of wandering (my satchel and it isn't heavy), I found there were three ways to leave Abai 1) take a boat to somewhere 2) walk back across the bridge (I hate backtracking) or 3) take the old-fashioned hand drawn ferry boat back to the mainland. You can easily guess which option I chose.

The ferry man used a metal hook and cable to pull the boat across and as I stood watching he motioned for me to help. I was more than happy to work side-by-side with this North Korean ferry man to reach my destination. The cost of the ferry was 500 won, about fifty cents.

Abai, I should also point out, is famous for something called the Abai Sundae. Don't expect ice cream , it's made of pig intestines, pig blood, kimchi, and other stinky ingredients I chose not to eat, but the expat who recommended Sokcho told me it was one of the most delicious meals in South Korea. In this case, I chose to avoid pork like a good Muslim should. Mostly it was because the term pig blood sundae made me nauseated.

Once across the channel, I found myself wandering in the modern part of town where I found a Baskin-Robbins with free WiFi so I could figure out where the heck my hotel was. South Korea is a weird land of contrasts. On one side of a hand drawn ferry is a North Korean fishing village and on the other is a Baskin-Robbins with free WiFi. Both have their charms.

I was a few blocks away from hotel which stood near the intercity bus terminal. I had arrived at the express bus terminal on the other side of town. My instincts led me in the right direction. The owner of the hotel gave me a magnificent orientation on the activities and sites of Sokcho. At the top of his list was to see sunset from Seoraksan National Park and to visit the gorgeous Biryong Waterfall. Seoraksan has more than 25 peaks, the highest of which is Daecheong-bong. The clustered peaks are magnificent. In the summer there are azalea flowers everywhere but since I was there in winter, I saw the snow covered peaks and deserted trails in crisp gray skies. For those who like to know the names of sites to visit, he recommended Geumganggul Cave and sunset from Ulsanbawi Peak. He gave me a map and showed the options for

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

different hikes or not hiking since you can take a cable car to the top where Gwonggeumseong Fortress sits. Despite the cold, this was one of my favorite places in South Korea. Along the hike there were plenty of food carts and thanks to the cold, there weren't too many people. Once there, I wandered around aimlessly. I can't tell you exactly what it was I saw, but I enjoyed it and recommend it.

Another recommendation was to eat a fresh seafood dinner along the beach and visit the pagodas along the Sea of Japan. The fish was amazingly good. Once again, like a guy who is on holiday, I didn't write down the name of the restaurant but it was budget-friendly and delicious. Search and you will find many like this in Sokcho but be careful because more than a few offered poor fare at high prices. I ate several streets away from the lighthouse observatory. The streets closest to the observatory and the pagodas offered higher prices and less fresh looking fish. My dinner was around 35,000 won (\$35) but the places nearest the observatory advertised 70,000 won (about \$70)!

The Naksansa Temple is one of only a few ancient temples built along the sea in South Korea. The temple was built by a Buddhist monk in the 11th Century. The place exuded an extreme calm and I imagined watching the sunrise from there, but not in winter since it was cold enough with the sun already up.



The Abai Ferry Man

VAGO DAMITIO

KOREAN BATH HOUSES - JJIMJILBANGS

One of the best things about South Korea is the jjimjilbangs. The bath houses. What makes them special? Unlike hammams in Morocco or Turkey, these are not places for only bathing and massage. These are full-blown social zones. The third place extraordinaire. I've become a bit of a bathhouse aficionado (okay, how gay does that sound?) and I found these to be without compare.

A jjimjilbang is a bathing place. It's a place you can get a massage... and more. Let me just describe the process. For 10 Euros you can check into a jjimjilbang for 12-16 hours. They are open 24 hours a day. When you check in they give you jjimjilbangs clothes. Usually simple shorts and blouse, sometimes colored white for men and pink for women. You will be given a locker key. Go in, take off your shoes, find your locker, grab a towel, and take off all your clothes (no room for modesty here, but I should point out that the locker and bath rooms are segregated by sex.)

Once you are as nude as all the other guys or girls, head into the bath-room. First of all, you should shower. No one wants to share a bath with the backpacker grime that has accumulated all over you. After washing, you have a choice of a number of tubs ranging from very cold to very very hot.

Jump in, soak, try not to be bothered by the fact that you are the hairiest person anyone there has ever seen. In addition to tubs and steam rooms there may be yellow-mud, pine, charcoal, or salt saunas, a cold room, an oxygen room, and a few special rooms where you can choose to get a massage or have some privacy.

You finish your bath and maybe you can chill out in the massage chairs or get some electrolyte drinks from the vending machine. Then you throw on your 'jjimjilbang clothes', lock your stuff up in your locker (don't forget to bring money with you, you'll want it) and head out where the sexes meet. There are mats and pillows, plenty of space to lie down on the floor, multiple TV rooms, extensive manga libraries,

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

video games, a restaurant, more massage areas, private rooms, and exercise areas just for both men and women. You can grab a meal, enjoy some tea, grab a mat and take a nap....

You can have a beer, go to the cinema room, go to the smoking room, or do almost anything you can do in the outside world but in a nice, safe, quiet little cave complex where stress seems to disappear. You can nap (but do be careful of your key while you nap since your valuables are presumably in your locker.)

Guess what? It's open 24 hours and you can shower, sleep, stash your things in a locker, drink, and eat there and you are allowed to stay there 12 hours or more. Do you get it? You can use it as a hotel. Show up at night, have a nice shower and a relaxing bath, enjoy dinner, watch some television, lay down on a mat, sleep, and wake up for another shower in the morning. In fact, the facilities are better than most hostels, better than cheap hotels, and you pay around \$10. The food is good, it's easy to make friends, and you leave feeling completely refreshed.

I regret is I didn't discover jjimjilbangs until the end of my time in South Korea. I should have avoided most of the time I stayed in hostels or love motels and stayed in jjimjilbang. In Busan, the jjimjilbang offers a view of the sea. I love jingabongs.



HITCHING TO THE DMZ

I have a silly confession. When I was a pre-teen there were two shows I was addicted to - Little House on the Prairie and M.A.S.H. I can still tell you the names of every character on each show. I can outline the plots of dozens of episodes though it's been more than 25 years since I watched those shows after school and before bedtime. For those who don't remember the shows, Little House on the Prairie was the story of a family as they homesteaded on the Great Plains in the 1800s and M.A.S.H. was a story about the U.S. Army 4077th Mobile Surgical Unit during the Korean War.

Don't worry, this post has nothing to do with Little House on the Prairie (though my psychological makeup has a lot to do with the show) and not much to do with M.A.S.H. aside from the fact every preconception I had about South Korea, North Korea, or all of Korea was based on an American TV show made in the 1970s about a war that took place in the 1950s. This is the reason I was so surprised to find an ultra-modern nation rather than rice paddies and water buffalo as I had expected.

Since the Korean War had played such a large part in my childhood development through M.A.S.H, I wanted to pay a visit to the DMZ that sits between North and South Korea. DMZ stands for Demilitarized Zone and is an area where it is prohibited to have weapons, armies, or military facilities. The two Koreas are technically still at war but they signed an armistice back on July 27, 1953. The Korean DMZ is a 248 km long and 4 km wide (155 by 2.5 miles) swath of land that runs between the communist North Korean regime and the ultra-modern South Korean industrial state. It is the world's largest DMZ and it has been active for more than 50 years now. The amazing thing about the DMZ is since no humans have been in it for most of the time it has existed, nature has fully recovered and it is filled with wildlife and forests despite once being ruined by the horrors of war.

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

I planned to go to the DMZ from Seoul but when I saw glossy tourist brochures and realized it meant riding a bus with a tour guide, taking an escorted walk into the (Panmunjan) area, and then getting on the bus again for an awful tourist lunch, I decided there had to be a better (and cheaper) way. In Sokcho, I realized I was closer to the DMZ than I had been in Seoul. I asked the owner of the hotel and said if I took the number one bus to the last stop, then hitch hiked, I would be able to get to the DMZ and the Unification Observatory - in Gangwan-do. The Unification Observatory sits on the South Korean Side of the DMZ and overlooks the mountainous coastline heading up to North Korea.

I'd been fascinated with Kim Jong Il and his whacked out claims to have invented the toaster, shot 18 holes in one in a round of golf, made movies, written operas, and penned more novels than any other living human. I wanted to go to North Korea, but the problem was I didn't have the \$10,000 it cost to arrange travel there. Hitching to the DMZ was as close as I could get. I was nervous about hitching to North Korea, but I decided to go for it anyway. This might be my chance to see it before it disappeared in a cloud of nuclear smoke.

I boarded the bus and rode it to the end of the line at Goseong. From there I stuck out my thumb and a father and daughter picked me up. They didn't speak any English but they understood I was heading to the DMZ. They took me up the coast through the concrete tank traps and along the barb wired Hwa-jin-Po-Beach where they dropped me off. I walked along the cold winter shoreline lined with barbed wire every inch of its beautiful length. Since the two countries are still at war, this is to protect against invasion, though in the summer months they open up the barbed wire gates to allow families to enjoy the gorgeous sand and shoreline. In fact, during the active war, this part was under North Korean control. Kim Il Sung brought his rotund son Kim Jong Il to play on these shores. Kim Jong Il took his son Kim Jong Un to beaches further North.

From there, I caught a ride with two guys who were taking weekend leave from their military duty. They'd driven overnight to come see the DMZ. These Korean soldiers were big guys, much taller than me and though we didn't have any language in common we ended up having a fun day together going through checkpoints, climbing to the Unification Observatory, and walking through the Gangwon-do DMZ museum. At the observatory, we looked out over Mt. Geomgangsan and Mt. Heageumgang. Gangwon-do is the only divided province in the country with half belonging to the North and half belonging to the South.

Looking at North there were mountains, coastline, and an empty road leading into the distance. Not a human soul in sight. There were

VAGO DAMITIO

only three visitors at the DMZ observatory besides us. All of them were Korean. No foreign tourists except for me sandwiched between my new Korean body guards. We had a light lunch of wet noodle fish kabobs and one of the Korean soldiers surprised me when he bought a souvenir scarf and gave it to me as a gift. It was a traditional paisley pattern orange bandana with a map of the area of Gongwan-do showing North Korea, South Korea, and DMZ plus the towns that exist. No towns exists in the DMZ. To the North they hide in the folds of living green mountains.

Our final stop of the day was the DMZ Museum. It is the only DMZ museum in the world. The museum presented a history of the Korean war, the separation of the country, the creation of the DMZ, and the hopes for peace and unification some day. There was something special about going through this museum with my new soldier friends. Each of us wrote our wishes for peace on the leaves of the paper peace trees inside. The museum detailed the entire DMZ, had a large collection of relics from the active war in the 1950's, and historic documentation of North Korean attempts to tunnel under the DMZ, infiltrate beaches with mini submarines, and sabotage the South Korean government with spies. The tunneling in particular is amazing since these were underground highway being carved out to move huge numbers of troops, armor, and equipment. From the DMZ and the world under Seoul, I can see one thing...Koreans love to dig tunnels. If this were middle earth, the Koreans would be the dwarves, though I was the dwarf next to my tall new friends.

I could combine my childhood TV watching with my experience and write a new series called "Little House on the DMZ". Towards sunset, my friends dropped me off in Sokcho and headed back to their duty while I suddenly had a new understanding about Korea, the Korean War, and the DMZ. I still hoped at some point I would see a rice paddy or a water buffalo though...

FAMILY DAY AT THE PENIS PARK

Haesindang means something like Penis Park in Korean. When I heard about this, I realized it was an odd enough name that I had to go there. Was I nervous? Yeah. After all, a place called the Penis Park in North America would be filled with gay cruisers...

But this was different. The legend says a young couple were engaged to be married in the fishing village of Samcheok and before they could be wed, the bride to be was swept to sea and drowned, thus dying a virgin and without the penis she so desired. She missed the pleasure of the penis on the wedding night and she was pissed about it. After her death, the seas around the village stopped yielding fish. No one could figure out why, but one night, a drunk fisherman took a leak facing the water, thus exposing his sizable genitalia to the water (and presumably to the ghost of the virgin). Q Apparently, she liked what she saw since after that, there were fish again. The villagers, understanding intuitively what they needed to do, began exposing themselves regularly to the ocean and later built larger than life statues of giant cocks to satisfy the nymphomaniac ghost. Over the years, the collection of phallic art was expanded and enlarged and the seashore became swollen with dicks.

I didn't want to go to the Penis Park by myself. In fact, getting there was tricky. I took the bus from Sokcho. I took a second bus from another town and a third bus to get to Samcheok and since I happened to be sitting next to a smoking-hot woman in designer sunglasses, I asked her if she knew how to get to the Penis Park. Fortunately, she spoke some English. She said yes, she knew. She told me which stop to get off in Samcheok and then she suggested we get a cup of coffee and wait for her friend who would tell me how to get there. Soon a second girl showed up and her English was better. We sat drinking coffee and I wondered if they'd thought I was talking about parking my penis since we didn't seem to be going anywhere anytime soon. They told me to sit and wait.

Fifteen minutes later a man in a minivan showed up. He, it turns out, was girl #2's father. The three of us piled into his mini-van and we

VAGO DAMITIO

headed to the Penis Park on one of the strangest family outings I've ever been on. A Korean father, his daughter, her sexy friend, and a strange American man they met on the bus drove off to look at dicks together.

Rather than being filled with gay pickup artists, the park was filled with Korean senior citizens posing next to the giant phalluses (or on them),enjoying the scenic beauty of the rocky seashore, and stroking of giant anthropomorphic cocks. The father insisted on paying my admission and we posed together for pictures with the many smiling puds.

At the edge of the park we ate the flat, dried fish the old women were cooking there. After that since they knew I needed a place to stay, the father dropped me off at his favorite sex motel.



SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

KOREAN SEX MOTELS -AKA LOVE MOTELS

If you've been to Korea, you know exactly what I'm talking about. In South Korea there are 'Hotels' which are generally pretty expensive, then there are 'Hostels'; (in bigger cities) which are hostels, and there are 'Motels'. The last are usually referred to as 'Love Motels' but are really 'Sex Motels' since these are where couples go for romantic weekends, where johns bring hookers, and where illicit affairs happen. They are also where budget minded travelers can stay cheaper than the hotels when the hostels aren't available or if they don't want to stay in a hostel or jimjilbong.

My introduction to love motels came after the penis park and to be honest, at that point, I had no idea that 'Motel' in South Korea really means love motel. Meaning, a place where you can take your woman, park your car, and enjoy sweet love. Or you can arrange to have some love brought to you with the hotel. Everything is casual at the love motels.

All I knew was that for 40,000 Won, I was staying in a big fancy room that provided soap, cologne, toothpaste, a toothbrush, a razor, a big plasma television, a king size bed, a computer, and a big huge bathroom. After the rigors of the Penis Park it was good to have a deluxe place to relax.

It was only later when I went to Andong and met a teacher there, that I learned the fine points in differentiating between types of lodging in South Korea. He explained to me that in Busan, where I was heading next, it was cheapest to stay in the love motels. When I asked what they were, he explained the difference between hotels, hostels, and love motels..

In Samcheok, it wasn't obvious to an innocent like me that I was staying in a den of sin. In Busan, it was far too obvious and I walked away from more than one place that had sheets that held pubic hair, the smell of semen heavy in the room, or in a few cases, rooms that I thought

VAGO DAMITIO

were cheap only to learn that the price was per six hour period. Even I was able to figure that one out.

I stayed in three different love motels in Busan. They were cheaper than the hostels but loud with the fucking of guests on all sides. In each one, I was given a plastic pencil pouch with a toothbrush, razor, toothpaste, and a condom. The rooms had cologne and mouthwash next to the sinks. None of them lived up to my first love motel though. That one was special.

I like the love motels because they are over the top bizarre. Some of them have amazing themed designs, they have semi-dirty films in the rooms, in a couple of them, the ladies of the house offered to fetch me some ‘boom boom’ and one lady was particularly insistent. “I get you Russian girl, okay?” “You want boom boom with Korean?” “You like I get you Swedish?” “Maybe you like boom boom with Filipina?”

Despite the attractive sounding menu (60,000 won for the night or 30,000 won for an hour), ‘boom boom’ wasn’t a particularly good idea, so I said no. The room was just 35,000 won which was a great value in Busan where a hostel dorm bed was 50,000. The next day, I left the boom boom motel to look for someplace a little quieter and met an Indian girl who was also looking for a cheap love motel, we searched long and hard in the Hondae Beach area but the best price there was 40,000 unless you wanted to smell the sperm of the last resident. The extra money in this case was well spent.

My last love motel was the worst one. It was 45,000 and the door didn’t lock! While the room was nice and the sheets were clean, the amount of boom boom going on was mind blowing. Korean people don’t show affection on the streets but when they get in the love motels...wow.

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

I LOVE YOU MUMMY!

Some experiences touch you more than others. The story of an ancient Korean mummy and his heartbroken wife hit me hard as I traveled and remembered my wife at home, pregnant with our first child. My own journey here was random. I came to Andong with no idea of what to do or see. It was a random bus I got on with no plan. When the bus passed by Andong National University, I figured it was a good place to wander around since Universities tend to have free libraries, galleries, budget-friendly food, and interesting people who speak English.

It was my good luck to find the free archeology museum where the Andong mummy lives so I could discover this story. It's a famous story by now, but maybe you haven't heard it yet. Everyone in Korea knows it and when the mummy was found, and the letter with it was read, it touched hearts around the world. On this day, it touched my own.

The 16th century mummy was found by archeologists in Andong City and identified by researchers at the Andong National University as Eung-tae, a member of the ancient Goseong Yi Clan. Eung-tae was found in a wooden coffin inside an earth hardened tomb. The archeologists were excited to have found a male mummy, not a common thing in South Korea. His beard and clothing were still preserved and they found he was not quite tall at five feet nine inches, which today in Korea puts him above the average. On his chest, much to their surprise, they found a letter from his wife, which is how his identity was revealed.

The letter was heart-breaking and over the next few years led to novels, films, and an opera. Here is the text of the letter translated to English:

To Won's Father

June 1, 1586

You always said, "Darling, let's live together until our hair turns gray and die on the same day. How could you pass away without me?"

VAGO DAMITIO

Who should I and our little boy listen to and how should we live without you? How could you die before of me?

How did you bring your heart to me and how did I bring my heart to you? Whenever we lay down together you always told me, "Dear, do other people cherish and love each other like we do? Are they like us?" How could you leave that behind and die ahead of me?

I cannot live without you. I want to go to you. Please take me to where you are. My feelings toward you I cannot forget in this world and my sorrow knows no limit. Where can I put my heart now and how can I live with your child missing you?

Please look at this letter and tell me in detail in my dreams. I want to listen to your words in detail in my dreams and so I write this letter and put it in with you. Look closely and talk to me.

When I give birth to the child in me, who should it call father? Can anyone fathom how I feel? There is no tragedy like this under the sky.

You are in another place, and not in such deep grief as I. There is no limit and end to my sorrows and so I write roughly. Please look closely at this letter and come to me in my dreams and show yourself in detail and tell me. I believe I can see you in my dreams. Come to me secretly and show yourself. There is no limit to what I want to say but I stop here.

The letter and the mummy made me suddenly aware of the risks I was taking traveling away from Hanane and the child she carried inside her. My child. In that moment, I wanted to go home, to be with her. From there forward, my journey held no joy. I met interesting people, saw astounding sites, and yes, I enjoyed myself, but my heart was no longer in it. I kept thinking of this woman, weeping upon learning the death of her husband, weeping as her child was born, and struggling through life as a single mom without the man she had come to depend on.

Perhaps it was for this reason I didn't have a desire to take any great risks, to test the limits of my endurance, or to push the limits of my already limited budget. It would be several months before I would be able to be at home with my wife and our unborn child, but upon meeting the mummy, I made a promise I would make it home for them. From Andong to Busan, back to Seoul, back to Kuala Lumpur, to Singapore, Jakarta, and back to Turkey I walked carefully and kept in mind there were two people waiting and relying on me.

Now, I am home- back in Morocco with my wife and our daughter. I am so grateful that I didn't become the American Mummy. I'm glad I was careful. I'm glad I made it home.

WHORE WATCHING IN KUALA LUMPUR

“That one’s a sexy dancer.”

“You mean a stripper?” I asked.

“No, a sexy dancer. She gets paid to dance sexy in the bars so guys think they will get lucky. She has to stay until the bar closes and then she can do what she wants.”

“What about that one?” I asked, pointing to the girl in glasses across the road. She looked like a Chinese student, she had books. I figured she was waiting for a ride.

“She’s a street whore. Obviously. Just watch the cars pull over and talk to her. She negotiates, they say no, but someone will say yes soon.”

I thought she was waiting for a ride and talking with people. For such a worldly guy, I can be exceptionally innocent in my thinking.

Soon a car pulled up, a guy parked it, opened the door, hit his beeper alarm, and they walked off to whatever hotel she had a deal with. Maybe she was just waiting for him...

Meanwhile, my Malaysian friend and I sat across the road on a dirty chunk of concrete drinking Tiger beer and watching the parade of hookers, strippers, sexy dancers, nude dancers, bar girls, hostesses, and every once in a while, a normal girl go by.

These were women I would never guess were prostitutes or sex workers.

“You see that one there? She has a food cart she works at during the day and her husband, something happened to him but she’s an Auntie and has not only her own kids to care for but her kids kids and her sister’s kids...I’m guessing here...and it’s too much so she has to bring more in and now...well, there’s somebody that finds Aunties sexy” and as we watched the Auntie with the food stall climbed in a car and drove off for sex.

It wasn’t all tragedy. In fact, it was fun. I learned what the sexy dancers do and that the Malay girls are the most expensive because

VAGO DAMITIO

people want the local girls when they are buying sex, apparently. The Indonesians get paid the least and after them the Indians and Chinese. Some of the clubs pay premium Russian, Swiss, and other white professionals to bring in some diversity vagina.

I learned the price for a street whore is 20 Malaysian ringgits, right around \$7, which is amazing when the Guinness Stouts we'd just drank were 32 ringgits (\$11 each). Pretty amazing, of course the Guinness with it's frosted glass, dark brown color, and cold delicious taste was attractive in every way while the \$7 street whores were attractive in no way at all.

My friend had been generous in buying me a couple of beers when my budget ran out and now we drank some cheap Tiger beers where the view was interesting but we weren't paying a premium to be seen (although we were only 50 feet from the \$11 beers, our beers now cost \$3 from the 24-hour market behind us.) The evening began when he had taken me for a street food tour where the food stalls wait for tourists and hungry locals. And now, in front of my hotel, we watched the sex worker parade.

And then, two women with dark black skin and thick African bodies came up to us. They were high as fuck on something but having a nice time.

"Hi, I'm Lawanda" Yes, that was her name. And her thick East African accent, huge breasts, giant teeth, and round booty made her that much more Lawanda. "And this is Rachel..."

In terms of stereotypes, these girls were CREATING the stereotype. They were the origins of the stereotype and while a stoned out whore with smoldering eyes and a huge booty stuffed into a leopard-spot body suit might sound unattractive to some, she was not.

Rachel was a woman who oozed sexual energy. If there is a sex goddess, she is it. Working as a whore and loving it. I'm sure. She fucking oozed it.

Both stoned whores shook our hands politely and then began to query us about whether we wanted to party, if we wanted to party, if we wanted to buy them drinks, and if we would give them ten ringgits because even though we didn't want to party, they wanted to party. All of which my friend deftly refused by claiming we were backpackers going on a safari the next day.

Actually, he and Lawanda were the ones that talked. Rachel stood there oozing sex and I sat there enjoying it but not willing to go there, not with someone else's cock and a dozen rubbers. I'm lucky I didn't catch VD from shaking hands with her, but man, I'm sure that would be an

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

experience like no other.

And so, they walked away with Lawanda cussing at us and Rachel looking at me with those sex filled eyes as she walked away. I caught my breath...."Holy Shit!"

"Leopard spots!" My friend said. "Can you believe those hot African prostitutes? Ha ha. Can you give us 10 Ringgits so we can party? Ha ha ha."

And that was when it started to rain. We stood under the awning of my hotel and said our goodnight. Before I went in, I watched as a fat Indian man came out with an umbrella for the fat Indian prostitute in front of his shop. Was it his wife? His daughter? His employee? Who knows. Not me. It was a sweet end to the night, but the night wasn't over yet.

My friend went home and I went up to my room which faced the same street. At 4:30 in the morning, I heard screaming like someone was being killed. A woman screaming and a baby crying. A man yelling. The woman screaming bloody murder. I opened the window and watched as long haired man who looked like a combination of rock-star and martial-arts-artist argued with a nice looking girl holding a baby in her arms. The man wanted to leave and the girl had caught him and wasn't happy about it. A crowd gathered. The yelling and screaming didn't stop. It was a drama. She was screaming, maybe he was leaving her for another woman. Maybe he was abandoning her and the child. Maybe she had found out he was cheating.

Whatever it was, it went on for about an hour and the crowd grew bigger and bigger. Finally, it ended when the man grabbed the woman, kissed her, put his bag in the taxi, and then all three of them climbed in and the driver drove them away. The crowd slowly dispersed to wherever it is Malaysian people go at 5 am after watching a domestic dispute.

SICK IN JAKARTA – INDONESIA REVISITED

From KL, I took a bus to Singapore for a meeting with a start-up travel company that had become a significant focus of my trip. I'd been meeting with travel bloggers, travel writers, and hotel owners everywhere I went and I'd found the online travel industry was booming. The key was social networking.

That was where the start-up came in. They were developing an application to allow you to turn your existing social network into a personal couch surfing. To me, it seemed like an idea that could revolutionize travel. Imagine using Facebook to connect with friends of friends of friends in cities you were visiting. An even more friendly world.

I wanted in. This company had contacted me asking about ideas and ways we could work together. When I found out they were in Singapore, I arranged my travel schedule so I could have a face-to-face meeting with the CEO and his development team. This was the future.

I was still sick from the mystery virus and wouldn't have been surprised to keel over dead, but I wanted to make the most out of being there. Singapore had been my grandparents favorite city. My grandmother lived there while my grandfather worked in the Indonesian oil fields. I wanted to see Singapore.

I arrived a day early and explored the city. It was beautiful and modern. As a travel destination, I couldn't think of anywhere better for people who want to take an easy trip to an exotic place. Indian, Chinese, and Malay cultures overlap with a population whose first language is English. Singapore is a place where you can get anything from anywhere in the world and I've never been anywhere else that was so clean and felt so safe. An island, a city, a country, and a shopping destination wrapped up in one package. Too bad it's expensive.

The meeting with the start-up wasn't what I had been hoping for. They had been secretive about what they were doing and I had filled in

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

the blanks with what I saw as the logical step. When we sat down in a boardroom, the CEO gave me their pitch.

They weren't creating a travel social network at all - instead they were creating yet another hotel search engine and they wanted to harness bloggers to 'create a movement' - in other words, they wanted to get free promotion. That was why they had contacted me - they saw me as one of the bloggers who could help create their 'movement' - all in all, it was pitch speak for they wanted to become the Expedia for 'flashpackers' - the new breed of yuppie backpackers who wanted to stay in boutique hostels. People with money who wanted to backpack around the world without hardship or discomfort.

It was a good idea, but Roomorama and AirBnB had already captured that market. They were coming in too late and while I wanted to share my ideas about a travel social network, I knew better than to give away my cow hoping for a glass of milk. In fact, I wanted them to hire me - but that didn't happen. They wanted me to promote them in the hopes that someday they might pay me for it. The meeting was a huge disappointment and I decided to leave Singapore directly afterward for someplace more affordable - Indonesia.

I caught a ferry to Batam and a flight to Jakarta. I checked into the only hostel in Jakarta which wasn't a hostel at all. It was an apartment in a gated community that included a swimming pool and cappuccinos. For an increasingly ill person like me, it was a perfect place to spend the last week of my time in Asia as I tried to recover from whatever this flu was and start to put together a business plan for a travel social network. If no one else was going to do it, there was no reason I shouldn't. I was living that 'flashpacker' dream as I tried to write a business plan next to my hostel's swimming pool.

I'd landed a gig to write a short Jakarta travel guide for TripAdvisor. During the next week I compiled my data and took photos of family-friendly activities in Jakarta, day trips from Jakarta, and free activities to do in Jakarta. My time off was spent sitting by the pool while I tried to figure out how to build a travel social network. Mostly, I researched who the competition was. Not surprisingly, there were a lot of existing social networks, but there were no apps that utilized your existing network to give you information about travel. While I'm a geek, I can't write code and that was what I needed.

I did however, come up with an innovative plan for making the travel social network grow which even today, I haven't seen anyone using yet. I contacted a couple of venture capitalists and found lukewarm interest. I structured my business plan and tried to find someone who could put

VAGO DAMITIO

together the numbers portion which is where my business plan fell apart. No one in my circles of friends had the time or was willing to risk their energy on my venture. They said "There's already Facebook and Twitter so who wants to join another social network?" or "You've listed the competition and it looks like they've failed, so this won't work either."

It's next to impossible to pitch an idea via email. I needed to find a way to get back to the USA. I needed money to get someone to develop the app, but I couldn't find it so I did what I always do, I tried to go it alone and built a model travel social network which managed to draw 1000 people before I realized that without the app, it really wasn't going to work. So I closed it down.

All of that took place in the next few months while I worked in Istanbul - but the genesis of that took place next to the pool in Jakarta where I was as sick as I'd ever been. When I flew back to Istanbul, the illness vanished. I was sick during my entire trip but was fine when the trip ended.



SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

BEING FRUITFUL AND MULTIPLYING

My work in Istanbul involved creating promotional materials for a tourism company, overseeing the creation of a new multi-hotel booking engine, and assisting in organizing the day-to-day operations of a company that worked with tours and hotels. I was given specific tasks needed to be completed by the end of three months for a set amount of money. I like to work that way.

I took a quick trip to see Hanane in Morocco. I gave her money so she could find a house, furnish it, and create the nest she wanted for when our baby arrived while I worked. Other than that, I worked sixteen hour days so I could complete my work early and head back to Morocco to be with my pregnant wife. She was happy to be with her parents, but we needed to have our own place. It had been four months since we'd been fired and evicted by the school in Turkey.

She found a house in April, paid a month's rent, and furnished it, but didn't move in. I finished my contracted work in six weeks by taking no time off and working long days, seven days a week. It wasn't the most enjoyable time I've ever had in Istanbul, but I wasn't there to have fun. I hoped maybe after the baby was born and we figured out how to be parents, we might come back and live in Turkey.

By mid-May, I was back in Morocco with enough money to see us through while I figured out how to support a family. There was no job waiting for me in Morocco, but I had some ideas. We moved into the apartment. It was about a half-mile from her parents and we set about doing the domestic tasks that need to be done when you move into a new house, are expecting a baby, and trying to create a business. I'm not sure how this would have been if we were living in a country where having a baby costs thousands of dollars, rent is thousands of dollars, and food is thousands of dollars. In Morocco, three of those situations combined cost us thousands of dollars -which is a much better deal.

Our daughter, Sophia Damitio was born on August 1, 2011 - the first

VAGO DAMITIO

day of Ramadan that year. My wife, as a new mother who was nursing, was exempt from the fast but the rest of us began the process of no food or water during the daylight hours of the hottest month of one of the hottest years in recent memory. Sophia was lovely from the start and while initially we had a scare with some mild hip-dysplasia, she was otherwise a happy, healthy baby. The Moroccan government refused to let us name her Aya Sophia since that was the name of a church, but they allowed Sophia which is one of the acceptable names of the Moroccan government. Like me, my daughter has a first name that doesn't appear on any official records.

I like to say she was made in Turkey by a Moroccan-American partnership. In fact, she is an African-Arab-American with European and North American roots who was made in Asia. She is a child of the world.

The fast was difficult and during the course of it, I realized my beliefs didn't require me to do this. I continued out of courtesy to my wife, but let her know it was the last time I took part in the enforced Ramadan fast of Morocco. I saw far too much hypocrisy attached to the practice for me to do it again. Fasting can be beneficial, but not when it is forced on a population by the state or cultural conventions. I started it and finished it.. My fasting is my own business from now on.

In September, I was invited to go sailing in Greece with a friend who had bought a yacht. My wife was happy to see me disappear for a while as she was tired of having a grumpy grumbling guy around who complained about the way situations work (or don't work) in Morocco. With Ramadan over, I was more bearable, but I needed to go renew my visa anyway since the Moroccan government had refused to renew my carte de séjour (resident permit) because I had neither a job nor a Moroccan bank account. That was fine with me as staying in Morocco for longer than three months at a time makes me crazy anyway.

In September I was off for a few weeks of sailing. The sailing was calm and relaxing. I spent the next few weeks getting the paperwork filled out for Sophia's Consular Birth Abroad . I managed to get her a US Passport and US citizenship which felt like a huge success. By the end of September, she was officially an American. The process for my wife, however, was growing more difficult. When I went to file the consular spousal visa, I was told as of August 1, there were no more consular visa filings in Morocco. I would have to go through the much longer process of mailing paperwork to the US.

I found a special on flights to Paris and booked a flight for our little family so we could spend Thanksgiving in Paris. I hoped it was possible my mom, brother or sister might be able to make it to Paris to finally

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

meet my wife and daughter. As it turned out, my wife wasn't able to make it because even with six weeks, we hadn't allowed enough time to get a visa for a Moroccan to visit France. We had booked our trip in advance to make the process easier but to no avail. We visited the French consulate in Fez, wrote letters, made calls, sent email, faxed - but none of it worked. The man at the bulletproof glass window told us we needed to sign up for an appointment online but they were booked through the end of the year.

Invoking the visa renewal trip yet again, I set off to Paris by myself since I had already paid for everything to make the visa process easier. Sophia didn't need a visa, but there was no way I could take her and leave Hanane in Morocco. I didn't bother to tell my family in the USA since the point was to give them a chance to meet my family who wasn't coming with me.

Even though I was sad my wife and daughter weren't coming along, I was thankful to be heading out of Morocco. I hoped to find some Americans and a Thanksgiving meal through Couchsurfing. Hope springs eternal.



VAGO DAMITIO

THANKSGIVING IN PARIS

As I'd expected, there were other Americans in Paris and some of them were having a Thanksgiving feast together. Through Couchsurfing, I met a Puerto Rican girl from Florida who was also looking for a place to eat turkey and cranberry sauce.

She'd found a Thanksgiving party in the 14th Arondissement and we agreed to meet in at the carousel in Montemarte near the base of the hill the Sacre Couer sits upon. I'd found a lovely hotel for less than 50 Euro per night that offered a quiet room, a beautiful street view from the balcony and a central location. She had a dorm bed in a nearby hostel that was 30 Euro per night and shared with three strangers, had no view, but included breakfast.

I thought the carousel would still be open at 8 pm but the park had been gated shut and while there were still people strolling through the streets looking for coffee, dinner or drinks - there were also guys standing on the shadowed side of the street where I was waiting. They waited. I wondered if we were waiting for the same person, but then realized the other guys were dressed as if they were homeless. In fact, they were homeless, I wasn't sure what they were waiting for...but eventually the Couchsurfer showed up.

She laughed as she told me she wasn't sure if I was some guy waiting to meet up with a prostitute but then she'd recognized me from my Couchsurfing profile. I wondered if those other guys were waiting for prostitutes. If they were, they were sure to be disappointed after seeing her. She was cute, fresh faced, and fun. She had a flapper bob haircut with a curl that fit right into my stereotyped flapper expectations. She looked like an American girl in Paris in the 1920's.

We introduced ourselves and she took my arm as we began to walk away.

"Do you know how to get there from here?" I asked her.

"Here's the thing..." she said, "It's completely up to you..."

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

The Thanksgiving Party was expats that all knew each other but she had managed to get an invitation and then asked for permission to bring me along. She didn't know any of them. Checking into her dorm room that morning, she'd made friends with her two dorm mates – an American guy and an Australian girl. They'd both wanted to come along, but she felt funny about bringing them since they weren't invited. It was one thing to be a stranger bringing one person, but to bring three was too much.

The American was by himself in Paris for the first time as was the Australian. My new friend wanted to skip the Thanksgiving dinner and go out with me and her roommates and see what a Thanksgiving in Paris was like - she left the decision in my hands. We could go to the Thanksgiving Party and meet the Parisian expats or we could go out on the town and enjoy Montemarte together.

Leaving her roommates behind flew in the face of the spirit of the holiday, so we skipped the party and decided to have our own. That was when she told me she had a two bottles of wine and a bottle of whiskey in her bag. Obviously, this was the right decision.

I've spent some time in Paris, but I have never had such an enjoyable time in Paris as that night in Paris. There was nothing spectacular or extraordinary, it was a night like one of 'those' nights in Paris you read about.

We started at Le Chat Noir, which I might add, is my favorite bar in Fairhaven, Washington. It's the place where I've sold more of my own books than any other. It was in Le Chat Noir people first started to call me Vago which (I mentioned before) is short for Vagabond. It comes from the cover of the book I was selling in there every night to pay for my bar bill...yes, Rough Living: Tips and Tales of a Vagabond (which by the way, Booklocker had misspelled as Vegebond - I'm lucky not to be Vego.) Both the Fairhaven and the Paris 'black cat (or shitty kitty)' shared the logo, the name and now, my patronage.

Le Chat Noir was a 19th-century cabaret in the bohemian Montmartre district of Paris. It was first opened on 18 November 1881 at 84 Boulevard Rochechouart by the impresario Rodolphe Salis. Le Chat Noir is thought to have been the first modern cabaret. (-from Wikipedia)

We met up with her roommates and went straight to Le Chat for some drinks to begin our thanking. The American was a big gay guy from New York, that rare breed of conservative Republican homosexual that

VAGO DAMITIO

somewhat manages to exist. He was funny and through the night he and I created a lot of laughter as we tried to figure out why I was more gay than he was - he likes sports, I don't, I like design, he's not into it, I was wearing nice shoes, he was wearing trainers - but the whole argument fell apart when the girls pointed out , I like women and he likes men. The Aussie was a 19-year-old maniac away from her parents for the first time in her life and ripping a swath through Europe's capitals of decadence. It was she who suggested we go to a sex show but the idea was squashed by our gay Republican friend who claimed it disrespectful of the American holiday's family values.

It was a funny and perfect night. My Couchsurfing friend was another anarchist radical who believed food security was the biggest threat to humanity and the two of us did our best to 'turn' big Mike from the dark side teaching him about GMO, Monsanto, the WTO, the Wall Street Protests, liberty versus democracy and more...

There was no turning the Republican though. Meanwhile, the Aussie was killing us with off color stories from her three weeks on the road so far. We left Le Chat Noir and wandered through the hilly streets of Montemarte drinking whiskey from the bottle and when it was empty, finding a small dive bar where we huddled around a table and drank some funny cocktail the Aussie introduced us to that might have been absinthe if we had been there a hundred years before.

The last brasserie we went to had some dancing, though most of the patrons were standing at the bar. We joined them in both the standing and the dancing. At a table near the dance floor, sat a tiny wrinkled person that could have been a man or a woman. The person (because I can't say he or she with any certainty) sat passed out with a huge glass of beer clutched in one shriveled old hand and a black umbrella in the other. Dressed in a gender neutral hounds-tooth suit, the clothing gave no help in determining the sex. She may have been dead, or a man – I really couldn't tell, but the Aussie snapped a picture with her phone of him/her and then everyone in the bar was posing next to the table. It went on for at least fifteen minutes with French patrons lining up for their photo with the passed out Mr.? Mrs? Toad. We never found out the gender or whether she/he was alive at all because before either question could be answered, it was time for us to go.

We staggered back to their hostel and the three of them worked together to smuggle me into their dorm room where there was, after all, an extra bottle of wine waiting There we continued to drink, talk, and laugh until the three of them had passed out and I snuck back to my hotel room.

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

It was a perfect Thanksgiving in Paris and as was happening to me more and more frequently, I felt intense regret at having to leave a country I was enjoying to go back to Morocco.



FIVE-STAR TURKEY

In 2012, I found reason to go back to Turkey again. I was offered another three-month gig working with hotels and tour companies in Istanbul. January was filled with long days and no time off. I stayed at the hotel I was consulting for so it was better to leave my family in Morocco until the hard work was done. Hotels are nowhere to live with a family for months on end.

Halfway through February, a friend loaned me her apartment, so I brought my wife and daughter to Istanbul. Six weeks was already too long to be away. I was still working long hours and not taking any days off, but since we had the apartment until mid-March, it was nice for us to be together. During January I was terrified because I thought I was going to miss out on my daughter's first words, first crawl, first laugh or some other first. I'm not sure we'll have any other children and I don't want to miss those moments. I'm happy to say, I haven't missed any of the notable firsts.

I hoped there might be an opportunity to work for this company full time, so I renewed my Turkish residence permit and gave them a proposal about my salary requirements. I knew if I was working with them, it would frequently be the same long hours and infrequent days off so my salary request reflected that. I know what I'm worth. They thanked me and said they would review it among the partners. The work I was doing for them was crucial and there was no one else who could do it for them as well as I did, but I suspected at the end of my current project, they would tell me it was too much money. Smart companies never piss off developers or PR pros.

It was fine with me but Hanane craves stability. For me, stability has never been something that has allowed finding the best situation. I kept my suspicion from her and she assumed the job would be mine at the end of the month, we would find an apartment in Istanbul, and I would keep slaving away. I didn't think it would happen. During our time in Istanbul,

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

I made contact with tourist companies, wrote copy and did PR in return for shows, dinners, cruises, and small day trips. I was getting the hang of working in the travel and tourism industry. I was learning the lingo.

The money may not be great, but the perks and benefits are. It's nice to always have a comfortable bed when you go to a new city, it's nice to be able to enjoy the five-star life when you can only afford the one-star life. My plan was to roll with the punches. I still hoped the partners would accept my proposal and we could stay in Turkey. I held off on the expense of getting my wife and daughter the residence permit until I knew whether we would be staying for certain. They each had a three month tourist visa, so there was no hurry.

At the end of the project, the partners told me they couldn't afford to keep me on full time. I packed up my family and we set out to explore Turkey in five-star luxury. I'd been contacted by a few high-end hotels, resorts, and tour companies who were interested in promotion, consulting, and technical advice. In return, they were offering us the chance to explore the luxurious side of Turkey.

We began in the Cappadocian town of Uchisar. We stayed in a five-star cave-palace owned by the former Turkish Minister of Tourism and Culture. Taskonaklar means Rocky Palace and that was exactly what it was. Everything at Taskonaklar was perfect. From the soaps to the fluffy white bath robes. I'd always wondered what it felt like to be a king or lord living in a sumptuous stone palace and as we looked down from our private patio on the magnificent Pigeon Valley and I sipped divine vintages at dinners prepared by a private chef schooled in European and Turkish cuisine, I knew. It feels great. This type of life is worth five-star pricing but can't be had at double the cost. Of course, as the personal retreat of the former Minister of Tourism and Culture, it was not surprising it was perfect.

We were pampered. Fresh honeycomb for breakfast, private tours, a sunrise hot air balloon trip over fairy chimneys, stone cut churches, and ancient cities. Each moment was more divinely inspired than the last. We ventured into the massive underground city of Derinkuyu, hiked in the valleys of Ilhara, and learned the ancient Ottoman art of Ebru, painting on the water, from an Ebru master in Uchisar. On the night of our two year wedding anniversary we were wined and dined at the finest restaurant in Cappadocia where we were given preferential VIP treatment. My wife may be the daughter of a shepherd, but she took to being treated like a princess with no problems at all.

From Cappadocia, my plan was to travel east to Nemrut Dag for a trek up the famous mountain to see the ancient stone heads. From there

VAGO DAMITIO

to Gaziantep, Sanliurfa, and Hatay. We'd already met with several of the Antakaya mayors and were looking forward to seeing their province - but the problems with Syria were too serious for me to take my wife and infant daughter to the areas where more than 100,000 refugees were trying to escape the genocide of their president and mortars were regularly flying across the border. Nemrut Dag was snowed in by a late season blizzard and Antakaya was too close to Syria. We canceled that part of the trip.

Instead we traveled to Konya for a visit to the tomb of the famous Persian poet and Sufi mystic, Jelaladin Rumi. Visits to famous tombs are rewarding, but I had another reason for going to Konya. I wanted to visit the oldest known city in the world - Catalhuyuk.

In Konya, we were staying in a regular 3-star hotel and my wife wasn't happy about it. She'd become used to being treated like royalty at Taskonaklar and now we were common people again. As for me, I'm happy sleeping in a ditch or a palace and as long as I'm not sick. Life is too good.

I left Hanane and the baby in Konya while I took a taxi out to Catalhuyuk. It was an archeological site with a few signs pointing the interesting features that had been unearthed. I'd written several papers about it while at university and I wanted to see it. I wanted to experience it - the oldest city in the world. What was it like to be there?

Part of the reason I like going to ruins and tombs is because I can imagine what it was like for the people being there, I try to imagine the people and sometimes it feels like I can sense them. Not to sound hippy-dippy about energy or ghosts or anything like that, but there is definitely something - ah, never mind. No matter how I try to explain it, it sounds hippified and new age. This isn't the place for that, so I'll say that Catalhuyuk was interesting and leave it at that.

We visited Rumi's tomb that afternoon and I won't get into the spiritual reasons there either but I can tell you with certainty, I was not one of the people making invocations next to wax work dummies of dervishes. Hey, I'm not judging too harshly though, because at least the wax dummies can be seen.

From Konya, we were invited to the posh Tuvana Hotel in Antalya. While there are big corporate hotels in Antalya, for me, Tuvana offered more than a Hilton or Four Seasons ever could. It offered a story. A beautiful Ottoman house converted into a beautiful hotel sitting in the perfect part of old town of Antalya. The owners brought Michelin chefs to create the ultimate Antalya fine dining experience. My wife was happy again, but I should point out that she was still saying "Oh,

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

Taskonaklar..." under her breath in a mournful tone.

In this manner we spent the month of April sleeping in magnificent cave hotels, gorgeous old Ottoman homes, eating some of the finest foods that can be purveyed in Turkey, exploring jungle ruins from tree houses in Olympos and having cocktails on meticulously cared for Turkish yachts. We lounged next to infinity pools while looking down on ancient castles in Bodrum and ate food that had lengthy explanations from the chefs as they presented it at our tables.

Yes, we lived the lifestyle of the rich and famous. I was trading writing, promotion, and consulting for the five-star treatment. I wasn't getting cash, but our outlay was minimal and the enjoyment factor was over the top. Each success led to another and with more time, I knew I could start to bring cold, hard cash into the equation which would hopefully limit the amount of time I needed to spend hustling for dollars online.

More and more, I was hearing the term 'Travel Blogger' thrown around as if it were some actual profession instead of a hobby for people who traveled. I'd been blogging about travel for years at this point and I was hopeful it might make the leap from a hobby to a profession. Most of my income during the period of this book came from doing computer work, creating promotional materials, building websites, teaching English, and selling magazine articles. I made some portion of my income from travel writing, but as far as travel blogging, it had never paid anything.

It was time to explore the possibilities. I decided to join with what had become a sizable travel blogging community. Our five-star Turkey tour was on hold while I went to Italy to meet up with the 'Travel Bloggers'. Hanane and the baby visited with friends in Manisa, I went to Blogville.



VAGO DAMITIO

BLOGVILLE

I'd never called myself a 'Travel Blogger', since for me, the term writer was enough. I'd decided to dive into the community of 'Travel Bloggers' and 'travel bloggers' - though what I saw on most of their LinkedIn profiles was that they listed their jobs as travel writers, journalists, travel professionals, editors, or founders of their site - not travel bloggers.

There were two big conferences for travel bloggers (I'm going to stop using the capital T and B but I want to point out I use the capitals to differentiate between those with massive overblown egos and those who were simply sharing stories of their travel with friends and readers). The first conference I heard of was Travel Blog Exchange, a U.S.-based group that was bought by a big blogging company, Blogworld. I'd enrolled on the site but never been to the conferences. I assumed it was a professional organization for travel bloggers.

The second was the more militantly named Travel Bloggers Unite. It was more European focused. There was a big meeting of travel bloggers in Umbria, Italy and on the heels of that was an experimental promotional event put on by Emilia-Romagna Tourism. Called Blogville, they brought travel bloggers to live in a house for a week at a time and write about the food, culture, and activities of the Emilia-Romagna region. I was one of the first to apply for Blogville and I was offered a spot in the house at the end of April. I was the 1st of the Blogville Bloggers.

My housemates were coming from the TBU conference. I was excited to meet them. I was excited to be on the cutting edge of creating a new industry. I was excited to be seeing, eating and exploring Italy. I was hoping someone had discovered ways to make money as a travel blogger that hadn't occurred to me. As I said before, my earnings came from other sources.

Ultimately, I found it was the same with everyone else. People were making money from selling links (but generally not on their travel blogs

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

because Google punishes link sales with lowered page rank), they were making money from selling ebooks, they were making money from advertising (not much), and they were making money writing for real travel publications like newspapers, magazines, and online travel websites instead of travel blogs. From what I could gather, the main focus of the TBU conference was "Hey, let's get excited and be positive, but by the way, has anyone figured out how to make any money at this?"

Maybe some of them were making a living at it, but if that was the case, they weren't telling anyone else how they were doing it. I met two types. Type 1: Nice people that were going to either succeed as travel journalists and keep their blogs as a sort of resume. Type 2: Incredibly annoying self-promoters who were full of shit and would earn by exploiting the first type. Either way, I didn't see a future for anything that labeled itself a travel blog and I couldn't imagine anyone paying someone who defined themselves as a 'Travel Blogger.'

Why would a company pay a professional 'Travel Blogger' when it was easy to find a 19-year old girl on a Gap-year trip (the year between high school and college) sharing pictures of herself in bikinis who would give advertising, links, promotion, and social media shares because they gave her a 'Best Personal Travel Blogger' award? (Or any of a thousand other Travel Blogger Awards)

At the end of my week there, I found myself sharing a room with the most obnoxious of the obnoxious ones. He was a jumbo-jet snorer who interrupted me twenty times or more in the few days we'd known each other. On a certain level, I liked his enthusiasm, but the interrupting was unforgivable because he not only interrupted but then completely changed the subject, hijacked the conversation to something unrelated, and never allowed it to return to the original topic. On top of that, he was loud. Not just his snoring. His laughter was loud, his voice was loud, and his clothing was loud.

All of that was no big deal. The last night I was at Blogville, this guy's annoying interruptions made me decide I'd rather go to bed than hit him in the teeth as we all sat talking in the living room. Once in bed, his incredibly loud laughter woke me from the edge of sleep five times (from the other room with the door shut!). When he came into the room we were sharing he began to snore like a fucking chainsaw.

I laid there trying to get to sleep for an hour more and each time I was there, that chainsaw started grinding. Towards the end, I considered smothering him with a pillow. Seriously, I considered it. Instead of murdering him, I woke him up with a burst of cussing about how it was too late for me to go get a hotel and he should get out of the room before

VAGO DAMITIO

I smashed out all of his teeth I admit it, I wasn't nice and if it had only been the snoring, I wouldn't have said anything. I would have dealt with it. It was the interrupting, the loudness, and the overall rudeness I was pissed off about. Of course to everyone else in the house, I looked like a psycho.

At Blogville, I learned I didn't want to throw my lot in with 'Travel Bloggers'. There are a lot of nice people out there travel blogging, but when it comes down to it, the whole industry is exploitative and disgusting. I wrote a caustic piece about the problem with 'Travel Bloggers' which didn't endear me to any of those doing it and guaranteed I wouldn't be welcome at TBEX or TBU even if I wanted to go.



The Italian guys that set up Blogville were awesome. It's a shame I wasn't sharing the house with the four of them.

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

NOT SO SMOOTH AFTER ALL

I arrived back in Turkey after a week away and found my wife ready to go home. She's not a long-term travel gal and she'd had enough of living out of a suitcase. Her idea of a great holiday is to pack a big bag, go someplace, unpack the bag, hang out for a couple of weeks, pack the bag, and go home. It was unfair to keep dragging her around and telling her she couldn't buy more souvenirs.

"Do you want to go back to Morocco early or explore the Black Sea Coast in May?"

She wanted to go home. I changed our flight back to Morocco for two days later. I would have stayed out on the road indefinitely, but for her, this was the right decision. Sometimes it's hard for me to accept I don't get to do what I want any more, but that is what happens when you get married, have a baby, and take on new responsibilities. You have to compromise – unless you're an Arab, because then the word compromise means you have to lose.

I hated going back to Morocco. I'd had enough of teaching English but that was the only job available there. So far, I've avoided it, but I don't know how long that can last. The internet is flooded with travel blogs from every unemployed traveler, gap year student, or retired baby boomers. The 'successful' ones have the savings or income to sustain themselves while whatever might grow from travel blogging and online travel matures. They are in places where they can network with PR agencies, travel companies, and travel start-ups. I'm not. In Morocco, I get a lot of offers from people who want me to build websites for them, do marketing, or manage their SEO but for the most part, they are offer less than I need to survive with a family.

In mid-2012 a travel link buying frenzy took place and I managed to bank about \$10,000 before Google changed their search algorithms and killed what looked like a solid industry forming around travel sites. With that, my writing, some affiliate sales, and a few link continuing link

VAGO DAMITIO

sales we could survive here for the long term and have a decent life. The problem is I hate living in Morocco.

At the boarding gate for our flight back to Morocco, the Moroccans crowded forward regardless of whether anyone was in line or not. In Morocco, there is no such thing as a line, you simply have to push your way to the front. When we lined up for customs and immigration, people shoved past us again and again - I refuse to participate and sometimes I'll grab a pushy Moroccan dude and tell him in Arabic "Shame on you, I was standing here first." They always look abashed and then wait behind, but someone else comes, and then someone else, and then someone else. It's exhausting. I can't fix the problem with Moroccans waiting in line.

Back in Morocco, we headed to the train below the terminal. The airport security guard asked my wife where we had been, what country I was from, and how long we had been gone. Then he told my wife to give him some money. I understood the whole thing and laughed at him, "Why would I give you any money?" We moved on but I heard him do the same thing to every Moroccan who walked by. Some gave him money, some ignored him. The corruption and bribery here (baksheesh) is a non-stop and annoying. Trying to do official paperwork or business involves navigating a thousand hands held out. The hardest part is determining which to ignore and which to pay off because sometimes you have to pay them if you want to get anything done.

At the train station, I asked the cafe attendant for some hot water to make formula for our baby. He demanded I pay the price of a coffee. The price is low enough (about \$1), but during our time in Turkey, no one had asked for such a ridiculous thing. When we arrived in Fez, we needed a taxi. We negotiated fiercely and managed to get the price down to twice the actual rate instead six times the rate it had begun at. Within a few hours of being back in Morocco I was exhausted and when the taxi driver drove us into our town, he demanded extra cash. I wanted to attack him, but instead, I told him to take us to the police so we could settle it. He was a cowboy (illegal) driver, so that settled that. I paid in exact change - of course he didn't want to go to the police since he was already overcharging us – even so, I would have tipped him if he wouldn't have been such a douchebag as to ask for more.

And so it goes in Morocco. The town we live in is not expensive by American standards but it's ugly and getting uglier. The expats in Fez have enough money to be insulated from dealing with the bullshit or haven't been here long enough to realize they want to leave. After a while, they all want to leave - you have to in order to maintain your sanity. Unfortunately, that means I have to leave my wife and child

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

behind periodically. In 2012 I again went sailing in Greece thus missing the Ramadan fast and flew home via Egypt and Turkey. Later, in November, I went to the World Travel Market in London where I came face-to-face with the ugly 'Travel Bloggers' again but also managed to make some great contacts for travel and writing. I keep staying in the 5-star hotels. Life is beautiful.

We wait on the notice from the US Government as to whether I can take my family back to the USA or not. I haven't earned enough to get the green card but my uncle sponsored my wife and assured the US Government that she won't ever be a welfare case. We sent the final batch of papers to the Customs and Immigration Service at the end of 2012 and now we wait to find out if we can return to my country.

It's the middle of March 2013 and here I am, writing this. Is this Smooth Living? I'm not so sure after all....one thing for sure...the future lies straight ahead. Hanane's immigration interview is in three days and I've already told her that we're leaving as soon as possible. If we get the approval, I'll book the tickets for our wedding anniversary and we'll fly East to San Francisco – and that will be the conclusion of my round the world trip. To find out what happens check out vagodamitio.com

Vago Damitio

17 March 2013

Sefrou, Morocco

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THE REASON OF THE ROAD

When I began to travel, there weren't as many people wandering around the world as there are today. Don't misunderstand. Since the 1800's there have been tourists and vacationists who take a short break from their lives to visit someplace they've dreamed about. Since the 1950's there have been beatniks who left their family and projected lifestyle behind so they could wander the globe. Since the 1960's there have been people who travel to find themselves. Since the 1970's there have been road hippies. Since the 1980's there have been more and more world business travelers and through that time there have been holiday and travel writers.

What I'm talking about is sheer volume. Today, there are more people engaged in long term travel (periods ranging from months to years) than ever in the history of humankind. Not only are there vacationists, travel writers, and people looking to find themselves but there are also gap year students, round the world travelers, travel bloggers, business travelers, family travelers, adventure travelers, solo travelers, spiritual travelers, historical travelers, and people traveling without labels. Add to this - travel is no longer the exclusive domain of Europeans, Australians, and North Americans and what you have is the largest industry in the world.

Travel is big, big business. It is the fifth biggest business and is only behind manufacturing, war, government, and agriculture. Today, it's rare to find someone who hasn't traveled. Places no one ever heard of two years ago are this year's hot spots and you can't look at the internet without finding a travel blog asking for donations or someone trying to sell you a book about how you can travel the world without money, a job, or a clue.

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

This, by the way, is one of those books. With a twist. The twist is I'm not sure traveling the world is going to be any good for you, so a large part of this book is dedicated to making you question what it is you want and whether travel should be a part of that.

In *Rough Living*, I said

"...the call of the road is irresistible and though I've tried to fight it, I'm powerless to hold it at bay. I am seduced by the desire to see what lies beyond the bend or over the next ridge."

I wasn't powerless at all, I was simply being weak. I didn't try to fight hard.

There are two types of people in the world. Feelers and doers. Feelers do what they feel like doing (and don't do what they don't feel like doing). Doers do what needs to be done. In giving in to the road, I was a classic feeler. It wasn't that I felt like being on the road so much as I didn't feel like doing the work I would have needed to do if I had resisted that call to the road.

I don't regret my choices. I regret my submissive attitude of powerlessness. I made a negative choice (based on what I didn't want to do) rather than a positive choice (based on what I did want or need to do.)

I chose rough living. Finding a way to live that didn't require me to do anything because I didn't need anything. You have to work hard to live that way. That's the joke. You put a lot of energy in and you get enough out to survive. It's inefficient.

I'm not saying working 40 hours a week, 50 weeks a year for 20 years is a better solution. I'm not sure that solution would have worked for me had I tried it. You need a direction to go in. Let's face it, your odds of getting anywhere are zero if you can't choose a direction to step off in.

Smooth living requires you to understand what it is you want out of life. The desire to remain alive isn't enough, you must have something to head towards. Otherwise, you're trusting your entire life to blind luck. It might work out beautifully for you, but it might end in disaster.

I look back at the list of essentials I wrote about in *Rough Living* - essentials like sturdy boots, a knife, and a lighter - and the only possession I still consider to be essential is proper ID. Everything else is optional (of course you can't walk around nude,

VAGO DAMITIO

so it is good to have some clothing.)

There are two essentials you need for smooth living. First of all, a desire for something beyond mere existence. Second (and this is funny to me) you have to have proper identification. This is our world. The rest is optional.

I'll say this again later, but it's fair to tell you now. I can't teach you how to do exactly what I do because I can't teach you to be me. I'm a writer, I created an online magazine about travel. I've used contacts I've made through writing and publishing to gain extraordinary experiences. There are other people who have done more with less and plenty of people who have done less with more.

Ultimately, you have to be willing to look at what you have and figure out how to make the most of it. Simple as that. You still think you want an adventure? Let's begin with the basics.

Four Ways

Buying

The easy way to get what you want is to buy it. Whether you are looking for food, shelter, love, or excitement; cash can get you most of what you need. Buying is my favorite way to get what I need. It's easy, you can be picky and in the world of today, there is rarely anything you can't buy. The problem with buying what you want or need is that it takes money. I don't have enough money to buy everything in life. I don't think anyone does.

Making

This is the key methods of getting the essentials you can't afford. Of course, there are items you can't make (unless you have extraordinary skills that go beyond the context of this book) like money and a passport. You can't make a hotel, a career, or a car out of sticks and coconuts either. However, you are a genius fire making monkey and in a pinch, you can make some of the useful equipment you need. You can make contacts. You can make friends. You ARE a maker.

Asking

This is scary in its effectiveness. You figure out what it is you want, who has it or can provide it, and then you ask for it. There's no guarantee it will work, but I've found it invaluable to get over my shyness. I've even

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

said "Can I have this coat?" It was ridiculous and the answer was "No" but I asked. You won't know until you try. When I was hitching across Canada with \$4, asking provided everything I needed. I went into a beer store on a hot day and told the manager "I'm hitching across Canada with \$4. Can I have a beer?" Guess what, he gave me one.

Stealing

I'm not proud of it, but when I was younger I sometimes practiced the art of light-fingery. The negative energy, negative emotions, and negative feelings that come with theft make it the most expensive way to get anything. I'd rather go without than steal something – the price is too high. If you want to learn how to take things, I recommend Abbie Hoffman's *Steal This Book*. Be careful though, you are damaging yourself when you rip someone else off. Don't listen to that voice that tries to justify it. You're stealing your own happiness.

Specific Example – A Place to Crash

Buying - Find a hotel and book a room.

Making - Go into the woods, build a lean-to, sleep in it.

Asking - Ask people you meet or know, use online sites like Couchsurfing.org or, if you write about travel like I do request a comped room in return for promotion and review.

Stealing – Break into a house and go to sleep. Later, after the police arrest you, sleep in jail.

VAGO DAMITIO

WORRY FREE TRAVEL

Worry free travel. There isn't any such thing, but you can worry less!

Many people don't travel because of worries associated with it. Travel can be stressful and the media doesn't help by telling us about every travel disaster, terrorist event, or travel nightmare. The truth is, it doesn't matter if you are heading to Pompano Beach, Houston, or Tahiti because the dangers are about the same.

Nothing holds you back more than fear. Fear of the unknown. FDR said it right, we have nothing to fear, but fear itself. Face it, you're going to die and you're going to lose everything when you do. Everyone will. You have no control over when that is going to happen. |People miss out on the joy of travel because they think they can control safety. They stay home watching Jeopardy until they die of a coronary. They know the geography of the world, but they've never seen it. If you don't open the door, you won't see anything but the television.

Whether planning an extended stay or visiting tropical island beach hotels, the following tips will take some of the worry out of your vacations, cruises, or outdoor adventures. Being out of your familiar environment is something that can cause confusion and misunderstanding. It's normal. Don't worry!

Worry Free Travel Tip #1: Have your papers!

I'm not talking about your *New York Times*, I'm talking about documentation. I was asked about my birth certificate when I rented a car in London – that was an extreme example and I moved to the next counter. This is about your passport. Your passport is the key to the world. Make sure it's valid before you leave. Make sure it still has blank pages which can be stamped. Ensure you have the proper visa or can get the visa upon arrival. Here are the list of documents I recommend you travel with:

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

- * Passport - valid with blank pages
- * Country Visa
- * Copy of Birth Certificate (Just in case, you never know...)
- * Student ID
- * Driver's License
- * Credit Cards
- * Copy #1 of the above in your luggage
- * Copy #2 of the above hidden in a coat, pants pocket, or inside a different bag
- * 10 passport sized photos

Two copies? Yes. You don't want to worry, right? Having copies makes a huge difference if you lose something or run into problems. The photos will come in handy if you have to do anything relating to consulates or embassies. In regards to photocopies of your credit cards, I recommend you blank out some of the numbers on your copies and remember which number is blanked. '23', for example.

Worry Free Travel Tip #2: Dealing with Taxi Drivers

In many cities, taxi drivers are waiting to rip you off. This is true in third world countries and cities like Los Angeles, Las Vegas, or Orlando. Use the internet before you leave home to see how much a trip from the airport should cost. Often driver's won't use the meter for set trips and you need to know what the cost should be. Look out for 'special discounts' and make sure you have local currency because they often won't accept foreign cash, credit cards, or traveler's checks. If they do, they will gouge you on the rate.

If they offer to take you around on your first day for a small tour, take their card or number. Feign interest. If they think you are coming back, it is unlikely they will try to gouge you right away. Know where you are going to stay or at least *pretend* you know. Taking taxi recommendations for hotels is a fool's game. It's a way for them to make a few bucks at your expense.

Worry Free Travel Tip #3: World Travel with Kids

If you bring your children, bring their birth certificates. If you are traveling in some male dominated countries, single women traveling with children need written permission from the children's father. There may be other odd regulations you should know about before embarking upon your journey. Do your research. Airlines often have special promotions for kids that are worth finding out about.

VAGO DAMITIO

Worry Free Travel Tip #4: Lost Bags

There are a million travel nightmare stories about lost bags. If you pack everything you need in your checked bag, you are asking for it. Have a change of clothes, your trip information, and essentials like glasses or medications in your carry on.

Most airlines will provide you with a small amount of money if they misplace your bags and most bags are found within 24 hours. Make sure you have information about your rental cars, vacation packages, and hotel rooms with you. Don't trust your checked bag will make it. Why create an extra chance for yourself to worry?

Worry Free Travel Tip #5: Your Emergency Paper or Travel Book

While it would be nice to be able to memorize the essential information about your vacations, it isn't practical. This is especially true for extended travel. Create a piece of paper or small notebook with information about your hotel rooms, rental car, airline confirmation numbers, and any addresses or phone numbers you may need, such as embassies, your bank, credit card companies, or even tourist attractions or museums you plan to visit.

I call this my travel book. It is essential it fits in your pocket. It's also a good idea to have your passwords or pin numbers inside. You may think you have them memorized forever but in moments of stress, your brain can do funny things. The way to record these numbers is to write something that contains your passwords, looks natural, and doesn't scream out 'password'. Don't write: "UBC Pin = 6767" or "Citibank Password = HungryMonkey 101", instead write something like:

"6767 South Vegas Street, New York, NY" or "Places to eat in Florida - The Hungry Monkey on Route 101", you'll know what the pin or password is but it's unlikely thieves would be able to figure it out.

Keep this piece of paper or travel book on you at all times.

Now, stop worrying and start enjoying your travels.

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

FROM ZERO-STAR TO FIVE-STAR – THE INS AND OUTS OF FINDING A PLACE TO STAY

You've decided to travel, the question now is: Where are you going to sleep?

Back in my days of rough living, I snored away my nights anywhere I could close my eyes. I slept in ditches beside the road, in abandoned cars, on people's front porches, and in lean-tos built from pine boughs. If that's your thing, you can get some good ideas from *Rough Living: Tips and Tales of a Vagabond*.

However, let's assume you want some basic amenities like a bathroom, running water, a bed, blankets, and some degree of safety and security. What are your options?

Free Places

If you are looking for a free place to stay, you can use traditional or modern couch surfing. They say beggars can't be choosers and when you are asking for a free place to stay you usually get what you get. While there may be some room for choice, generally there is not.

Traditional couch surfing is where you ask your friends and family if they know someone where you are going. You request an introduction and then (this is important) you ask if you can sleep on their couch, in their spare bedroom, or in their country house. While it may be difficult to get up the nerve to ask, it can be worthwhile. They might say no, but if they say yes, you've opened the door to a fulfilling friendship and made it possible for them to ask you a favor in the future. For hundreds of years, people did this with formal letters of introduction. Today, it's as simple as asking someone to send an email, social media message, or provide a mobile number.

Modern couch surfing makes use of the internet and sites like Hospitality Club (<http://www.hospitalityclub.org>) or Couchsurfing

VAGO DAMITIO

(<http://www.couchsurfing.org>). These are travel social networks. Set up a profile, find someone in the place you need a bed, and then send a request. Couchsurfing is a great way to make new friends in places you are going. I met my wife through Couchsurfing. You should be warned, Couchsurfing is not a dating site. Love, however, sometimes happens in the most unexpected places.

Low \$\$ Places

I've heard a lot of travelers suggest programs like Willing Workers on Organic Farms (WWOOF) provide free places to stay, but I don't agree. When you trade work for a place to stay, you are paying. You may not be paying in dollars, but you are paying in hours. Generally, the price is high. Consider those college kids who trade four hours of work per day for a dorm bed in some hostel. Let's assume their work is worth \$10 per hour. That means they are paying \$40 per night for a dorm bed. That's \$1200 a month - enough to rent an apartment anywhere in the world. Are you willing to pay that for a dorm bed? I'm not.

Hostels are interesting. Nearly everyone I know in the travel world tells me how much they love hostels. I've stayed in some nice hostels. I've managed hostels. I've stayed in enough hostels to last a lifetime. Hostels were once a bargain, but these days I don't find them to be. The cost of a hostel is tagged to the price of hotel rooms. In the developed world the price is \$20-\$30 per night for a dorm bed or \$40-\$60 per night for a private room – sometimes en-suite, sometimes not.

I don't do dorm rooms unless there is no other reasonable choice. Whether it's someone snoring, some drunk kid puking on the floor, or some ultra-budget couple fucking on one of the dorm beds – I don't want any part of it. Loss of a good night's sleep costs too much the next day.

Private rooms in hostels are around the same price as a zero-star, one-star, or two-star hotel room in the same city. The hotel room will almost always come with ensuite bathroom, a good lock on the door, and the ability to have private time. I've found hostel private rooms to generally be inferior places to stay.

People love the sense of community and the good-natured English speaking staffs at hostels. Fair enough. I'm looking for a good night's rest, security, and some privacy. I can find better outside of a hostel. Then, in the morning, I can go to the hostel and speak with their good-natured staff and take part in their travel community – if that's what I want to do. Most hostels will let you join their budget trips even if you

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND
aren't staying with them. It's often something worth taking advantage of.

Cheap Hotels

There are tricks to finding a good low-cost hotel. Here is one of them. Find the area where there are lots of tourist hotels. Walk down the side streets nearby. Cheap hotels are often two or three streets from the main tourist area.

Cheap Hotel Checklist

- 1) Ask the price
- 2) Look at the room
- 3) See if the room smells funny
- 4) Check that the sheets and towels are clean
- 5) Check the mattress for bed bugs
- 6) Make sure the door and windows lock securely
- 7) Ask about checkout, WiFi, hot water, and security
- 8) Trust your instincts

Look at two or three hotels in the same area and see what you can get. Compare the prices and make your best choice. If you are traveling with a lot of baggage this can be difficult. My advice is to never travel with a lot of baggage.

Decent Hotels

A decent hotel has positive points going for it. Comfort, cleanliness, security, and value. The difference between a cheap hotel and a decent hotel is not completely obvious, at first. The pillows are fluffier, the towels are less worn, the staff is more professional, the soap in the bathroom feels like it gets you clean.

There are two types of decent hotels. Good hotels that have fallen on hard times and low-cost hotels that are trying to become good hotels. Avoid the first and find the second. The signs of the first are obvious – ill-fitting staff uniforms, general untidiness, and grim expressions. These are the places where the prices start high and the service starts low.

It's all about the staff. Walk into a place and if the reception is warm and friendly, the employees look happy and clean, and you get a sense of healthy cleanliness – book a room. Always ask for a discount on the price and always let them know you can't wait to recommend them on TripAdvisor.

A Note on TripAdvisor

TripAdvisor (<http://www.tripadvisor.com>) had the potential to be

VAGO DAMITIO

the greatest boon to travelers of the modern age, but people exploited it and used it to 'game' the system. This led to some draconian tactics on the part of TripAdvisor – such as deleting my 300+ reviews when a property I'd given a bad review to told them I was offering reviews for trade. There is some controversy over hoteliers paying for reviews, writing negative reviews of their competitors, and trying to work the system – in general, TripAdvisor has made life much better for the traveler. However, given that you won't be able to read my reviews (or others that have been removed for bogus reasons) – use caution in what you believe.

My advice is to never compromise yourself on TripAdvisor. While some hoteliers may request you leave a positive review, let them know you leave honest reviews. There is no need to be a jerk about it. If it's something the hotel can fix easily, you can tell them about it in person. If the staff is awful, the room has bedbugs, or there is some other major problem - be sure to let your fellow travelers know about it. This was always my policy with TripAdvisor, but when they deleted all of my contributions without giving me the chance to copy them to my own site, I swore I would never leave another review with them. My choice shouldn't stop you.

To get the most out of TripAdvisor, I do the following when I read reviews.

- 1) Read the negative reviews first.
- 2) Look at who the reviews are from. Are they from real people who have left a lot of reviews or from suspicious names that have left one or two reviews? If it's negative, look at other reviews they may have left, are they all negative? Are they mixed?
- 3) Do the same with the positive reviews.
- 4) Form your own opinion and make a decision.

Good and Great Hotels

I've stayed in wonderful hotels that had one or two-stars and I've stayed in five-star hotels that were terrible. The star system is a general guideline, but it isn't a sure-fire way to know whether a hotel is good or bad. In Turkey, the number of stars depends on the number of rooms a hotel has. So a great hotel with less than twenty rooms can never be more

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

than three stars and a terrible hotel with 100 rooms can be a five-star.

Good and great hotels focus on four key points. Location, comfort, service, and staff. All of the requirements of a decent hotel have been met and they go the extra distance to satisfy their clients.

It's been said more than once that location is everything. I disagree, but it helps. I stayed in a beautiful old hotel on the Mediterranean that had a Michelin Chef, beautiful grounds, a great staff, and a remarkable view. The pillows, however, were lumpy and to get to the nearest market or restaurant, I had to take a taxi. I wouldn't pay to stay there again. Location matters - and so do pillows.

The most beautiful hotel in Hawaii isn't going to get my business if I have to take a bus to get to the beach.

There is a level of service that sets great staff apart. A decent hotel staff might be chatty and friendly but a great staff learns how to do the essential functions without crossing your boundaries. Without asking or noticing, you are being directed to great sites, restaurants, or activities. Your water glass is full when a moment before it was empty. Your bags ended up in the bellman's hands and seem natural there. A great staff knows how to provide great service. If I hear a receptionist arguing with a guest, even if that guest deserves it, I know that I'm at the wrong place.

I am often surprised when I stay at what appears to be a quality hotel, only to find that they have skimped on creating comfort. Pillows are one example. Shower products are another. While a fluffy white bathrobe and some monogrammed slippers are nice, hotels don't have to go that far. Provide me with some quality soap, a fragrant shampoo, some q-tips, and a shoe shine rag and I feel spoiled. Give me a massive white fluffy towel and a complimentary newspaper and I'm transported to some glamorous magazine. Provide a welcome drink and some bottled water as a courtesy and I am invited. Give me an electric kettle and some instant coffee for the morning and I can start my day feeling great. These are not overly expensive. \$5 per guest should pay for all of these.

Lumpy pillows, worn towels, poor quality soap, no coffee, and a minibar filled with overpriced products are far too common. A free bottle of water makes me comfortable, a \$5 bottle of water in the minibar (that costs 50 cents next door) makes me feel exploited. You would think anytime you pay \$200 or more for a hotel room, these simple essentials would be a given. In fact, too often they aren't.

On the flip-side, if you search the right way, look for the right signs, and pay attention – you can find more for far less. In Bologna, Italy a decent room goes for around 100 Euro, but with patience, I found a fabulous hotel that provided everything I wanted and more for 55 Euro

VAGO DAMITIO

per night. In fact, it had the best hotel breakfast I've ever experienced included in the price.

AirBnB, RoomoRama, and Homestays

If you want to enjoy your stay, be independent of other people, or get to know the locals then you don't go to hotels or hostels. Couchsurfing is one way to go about this. Here are three more.

Check out sites like AirBnB (<http://www.airbnb.com>) and Roomorama (<http://www.roomorama.com>) where you can rent people's homes or rent rooms in their homes for short term stays. This is a great way to stay in beautiful mansions, amazing villas, and to truly enjoy the smooth life – without having to pay thousands of dollars (note: you can find places that *are* thousands of dollars, but I'm guessing the reason you are reading this book because you'd rather have the experience without having to spend so much.)

A friend of mine wanted to go to Bodrum, Turkey but he didn't want to pay the standard price of 120 Euro per night for a so-so hotel room. Instead he used AirBnB to find a beautiful villa with a pleasant sea view, three bedrooms, full kitchen, lanai, living room, and everything you need in a house provided. Guess how much he paid? \$25 per night! He saved more than 100 Euro per night and received much more value for their money.

Homestays are interesting. You can find people renting out rooms in their houses who agree to let you stay *with* their family and enjoy the true local life. You can find that on the same websites listed above or do a Google search of 'homestays in (*fill in the city/country*)'. This will lead you to organizations that will help you set it up. Those that are set up specifically for cultural exchange frequently include breakfast, lunch, dinner, and being a part of the family. Depending on where you go it can be as little as \$10 per night.

House sitting is another realistic option. You don't have to know the people! Check out the Caretakers Gazette and sites like Trusted House Sitters (<http://www.trustedhousesitters.com>). Homeowners all over the world are looking for someone to feed their pets, water their plants, and keep their house safe.. The cost is nothing and sometimes, they pay you!

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

24 MISCELLANEOUS ACCOMMODATION TIPS

1) An increasingly popular option (but, no longer free or as budget-friendly as they once were) is to stay in monasteries or retreats.

2) Camping is also increasingly NOT free. Neither is staying in your RV, since you have to pay hook-up fees, site fees, or if you don't - you run the risk of being asked to move by the police or harassed by bad guys.

3) Those annoying coupon books kids sometimes sell from door to door can be worth their weight in gold if you use all the coupons. 2-for-1 dining in nice restaurants, free nights at upscale resorts, 1/2 price admission to attractions. It all adds up if you can find one for a city you are going to visit.

4) Ask for a discount. "Do you offer discounts for [Seniors, Military, Students, Indigent Alcoholics, Ugly Americans, Long Stays, eunuchs, etc] ?" Even if they don't have a big sign saying they offer discounts, ask for a discount or an upgrade. Let them make you happy to give them your money.

5) Some universities offer discount lodging in dormitories during class holidays.

6) You can find all the fancy hotels in one place. It's usually a new and booming neighborhood. Go there, find a side street, and walk two blocks over. This is the neighborhood that once buzzed with 'it'. If it's not a few blocks one way, go a few blocks the other. It's close. Find a place that looks clean but a run down. Chances are you will be able to get a better than average room for half as much, don't be afraid to bargain. These places need your business.

7) Look at the mattress...know what bedbugs look like.

8) Stay where you get breakfast for free.

9) Make sure hot water is included. Sometimes there isn't hot water. Sometimes it costs extra.

VAGO DAMITIO

- 10) Earplugs are cheap, light, and can turn a horrible night into a restful one.
- 11) Fill out your travel social network profiles completely.
- 12) If you worry about the maids and bellboys stealing your cash, try this: roll up the bills and put rubber bands on them. Keep them less than 1/2 inch wide so you can pull the rubber stoppers from the luggage rack and hide them in the aluminum tubing.
- 13) Bring something small and meaningful for your host. A souvenir from someplace you've been shows you aren't a freeloader when you are Couchsurfing.
- 14) Don't leave your phone alone unless you want the maid to call her family in the Philippines.
- 15) Bring your own condoms. Trust me on this.
- 16) Don't surrender your passport to anyone but the police. Never forget your passport is worth quite a lot of money. It is your key to travel the world.
- 17) Bring your valuables to the shower with you in a hostel.
- 18) Write a review for anyplace you stay whether you like it or don't.
- 19) Be nice. Don't act like some spoiled jerk. You are dealing with real people.
- 20) Many hotels offer long stay discounts. If plan to stay longer than a week, call the hotel and ask for a discount BEFORE you book. Most hotels will offer you a discount or some free days with longer bookings, especially during non-peak travel times.
- 21) Sundays and Wednesdays tend to be slow days in most hotels. If you are staying on those days, call ahead and ask for a discount even if you are staying one night.
- 22) We live in the age of the web. Some companies offer a 50% discount from offline prices if you book online. Don't forget about Facebook and Twitter either! All the global travel companies promote with social media. They often offer special prices for those who know.
- 23) Package deals save you money. When you combine airfare, hotel, and rental car you can save up to 50% during non-peak times.
- 24) If you are Couchsurfing or crashing with friends, limit your stay to 3 days or less. This is unless you are contributing significantly to the household. More than a week is crass without paying.

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

4 REASONS TO STAY IN HOSTELS

I've been told that my prejudice against hostels isn't fair. I've been told that there are countless reasons to stay in hostels. I've discovered four that I believe are true.

- 1) Hostels can be great places to meet people.
- 2) Sometimes hostels are cheaper than a hotel.
- 3) Hostels can sometimes be good places to find budget-friendly tours, and activities.
- 4) If you want to have sex with foreign women/foreign men hostels are a good place to look.

If you must stay in a hostel, avoid the dorms and get a private room - even if it means finding a new friend at the hostel and sharing a private room with them while you are there. One stranger is easy to deal with. Four or six can be unpredictable. I always seek the best odds in life.

A private room at a hostel is the best value because you don't have to deal with inconsiderate, crazy, or drunk dorm-mates. However, if you are going to get a private room, have a look at hotels nearby because you have a good chance of getting a more comfortable room for the same (or less) price at one, two, or three-star hotels. Don't assume hostels are the cheapest option. Often they are more expensive than a better room somewhere else.

Paris is notoriously expensive. I have friends that pay 40 Euro per night to stay in awful dorm rooms. I pay 55 Euro per night to stay in a charming en-suite hotel room with a balcony in the center of Montmartre. Which would you prefer?

25 REASONS NOT TO STAY IN HOSTELS

I've listed the reasons you might want to stay in a hostel. I wanted to be fair and balanced. Here are 25 reasons not to stay in hostels while you travel.

1) They aren't always cheap. Generally, you can find a 1 or 2 star hotel for the same price as a bed in a hostel dorm room. In the past few years, hostels have gone way up in price so in many cases if you take the time to look, you can find a private hotel room for less than the cost of a hostel or something better on AirBnB.

2) If you want to make friends with foreign people you should go with Couchsurfing or AirBnb instead. If you want to have sex with foreigners, there are better places to meet them than at hostels.

3) The truly interesting, intrepid, and attractive travelers aren't at hostels. Instead you often find boring, cheap, and unattractive people - sometimes not travelers at all, but down and out losers.

4) Hostels can be filled with thieves and creeps. Not everyone is a thief or a creep, but as a former hostel manager, I can confirm there are a lot of both in hostels. If it can be stolen, someone in a hostel has stolen it. Whether it is food you put in the refrigerator, your laptop, money from a 'security box', or your girlfriend. Date rape, by the way is common in hostels.

5) Rubber sheets. If you like sleeping on rubber sheets - stay at a hostel. If there aren't rubber sheets you may want to consider how many drunk pukers, bed wetters, or droolers have slept there before you.

6) Bed bugs. More likely to happen in a hostel than in a well run hotel.

7) Squeaky top or bottom bunks. There's nothing like being an adult and sleeping in a bunk bed where you are woken up every time the person above or below you rolls over or needs to take a piss.

8) People will snore, fart, or breathe loudly. In hostels you are sharing a room with strangers and you get to know all their bodily

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

sounds and smells intimately.

9) People will turn on the lights while you are sleeping. My drill instructor in the Marine Corps woke us that way. I can tell you for certain I didn't like it. I don't want some 20-year-old English kid to wake me up that way either.

10) Crappy breakfasts. The breakfast in the Shelby County Jail of Memphis Tennessee consists of white bread, jelly, and Tang. That's what most hostels offer guests. How much would you pay for that? How much does it cost? \$1 or less - is that worth it?

11) Shitty locations. Out of the way, in bad neighborhoods, or in disgusting buildings. It's worth it to pay a few bucks to avoid these - there are exceptions, but not many.

12) A total lack of privacy.

13) The sound of people's bags zipping or unzipping when you are trying to sleep another hour.

14) One television set to a program you don't want to watch or hear.

15) Drunk 20-somethings. I'm not amused by them.

16) Rude staff. I don't know if they get this way because they are used to dealing with people who don't speak their language or if they have become condescending to people with no money, but far too often, hostel staff are rude as hell. Why don't they think they have to be nice?

17) Hostel rooms are generally about as cheery as jail cells. Like a jail cell you don't get to choose your cell-mates.

18) You won't meet the locals staying in a hostel. If you do, they are the down and out locals.

19) Filthy bathrooms. Even good hostels have filthy bathrooms after the 4-8 people you share the dorm room with use them. No thank you to gas station toilets.

20) Uncomfortable beds. Hostels make a lot of money and they squeeze every penny they can by keeping old uncomfortable (cheap to begin with) mattresses.

21) Cigarette and change bummers. I watched a guy bum a cigarette from four different people in 30 minutes at a hostel in Bergamo, Italy. When I told him I didn't smoke, he asked for spare change.

22) Wankers. Seriously. In hostel dorms...give me a fucking break.

23) Couples sharing a single bunk. Seriously. In a hostel dorm. Give me a fucking break again.

24) Pukers. Last time I stayed at a hostel some kid in the bunk next to mine puked all over himself and made the whole room smell like red

VAGO DAMITIO

wine vomit.

25) Having to navigate around other people's mess. Why is there always a huge pile right next to or hanging on the ladder to the top bunk?

Yeah- I'm not 27 anymore. I'm married and not looking to screw some drunk 18-year-old girl away from home for the first time. I've done my share of 'partying' and I don't have much tolerance for it any longer.

A hotel can be cheaper, get you a better night's sleep, and provide more of everything else. If each of the above is worth \$1 to avoid, then you can add \$25 to the \$20 you pay for a hostel bed in most cities. For \$45 you can probably get a decent 2 or 3-star hotel and buy your own breakfast. Or, if you are broke, you can go to jail and get the same experience as being in a hostel.



*You probably won't find this view of San Marino from a hostel. Just
in case you were wondering.*

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

FINDING THE RIGHT PLACE TO STAY

Let's say you are about to set out on a journey and you want to find the best places to stay before you leave. Despite my advice, you still want to look at hostels (no problem, I understand.)

How do you find the right spots?

The first thing you will want to do is to visit the following two links:

<http://www.hostelbookers.com>

<http://hotels.vagabond.com> *Full disclosure, I own this site*

Type in the name of your destination and see if there is anything listed. For example, let's say you want to go to Asilah, Morocco. It's a quiet beach town on the Atlantic Coast of North Africa.

First look at the list of hostels - there are two listed.

Christina's House

Dar Nour Asilah

Neither of these are hostels despite being listed at HostelBookers. Neither one of them has single bed, dorm room accommodation. *Christina's House* is \$51 per night for a double-room and *Dar Nour Asilah* is \$101 per night. Not hostel rates and when you look the descriptions, you find these are boutique hotels trying to market themselves to backpackers.

Fair enough, there aren't any hostels in Asilah (which could be part of why I like it so much!)

Looking at the list of hotels, you find the *Al Khaima Hotel* which is listed with three-stars and offers the same amenities (though not in the same boutique way) as the guest houses listed with hostels. The price is a few dollars cheaper and they have all the regular hotel amenities including a pool, tennis courts, restaurants, and a night club. Since it's not an open courtyard with the rooms facing it as you find in Moroccan

VAGO DAMITIO

guesthouses you have more privacy, AC, and the ability to watch television in your room instead of in a common room.

Don't get me wrong. If you've never stayed in a traditional Moroccan house, it's worth the extra money, but in terms of comfort, you are going to be more comfortable with the 'hotel' instead of the 'hostels' and it's going to cost you less!

We're not done yet. There hotels and hostels that aren't listed in the usual places. To find them you take a trip to TripAdvisor and see what they have listed. The advantage of doing your search in this order is you already have an idea of what is available, how much it costs, and what amenities they are offering.

Now you can see how they stack up against each other and against other accommodation in the area. At Trip Adviser you will find eleven listings for Asilah hotels and guest houses ranging from \$14 to \$158.

The great thing about Trip Adviser is you get to read reviews and they conveniently rank the sites. Be careful, however, because the site rankings aren't necessarily accurate. They are based on a variety of 'secret' metrics' TripAdvisor uses. In some cases a hotel with 150 great reviews and two bad ones (that could have been written by competitors) might rank under a newly listed hotel with five reviews. The point is to read the reviews -

In our example, you are still wondering where to go. Using the method above, you've narrowed it to Dar El Badia, Al Alba, and Christina's House. Fifteen terrible reviews and only six positive reviews made you strike the Hotel Al Khaima from your list. Any of the three remaining should be good.

There are two more places to look if you want to be thorough. Search the Thorntree Forums at Lonely Planet (<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree/>) to see if there is any further information on your choices. I also like to go to search Google blogs (<http://blogs.google.com>) for anything that might have been written by bloggers about my final choices. I also recommend you always search sites like AirBnB, Roomorama, or Couchsurfing just so you can see what is available.

STREET FOODIE AND OTHER FEASTS

My wife and I recently ate at a restaurant we heard everyone raving about. I was excited. Food and cooking are exciting art forms. I love food. I admit it, I'm a foodie.

To begin, we were brought a cracker in a soup spoon. On the cracker was a smoked oyster and a crumble of feta along with a colorful dab of red sauce and a dot of pesto. It was beautiful.

Too bad it tasted like paper. No taste, no subtlety, and no pleasure. Shows like *Top Chef* and *Master Chef* have shown a whole generation of chefs how to make food look appealing, but since the medium is the message (thank you Marshall McLuhan) – many have missed the part about food tasting delicious.

Street vendors, on the other hand, know the way food looks isn't as essential as the way food tastes. One of the great joys of travel is getting the chance to taste local cuisine. Fancy restaurants can provide something unique and regional, but often they have gone in trendy directions by providing food that looks like what they've seen on television instead of using techniques and styles that differentiate the local specialties.

There are two ways to taste a place. The first is to eat home food. Get yourself invited to someone's home and eat their mother's, grandmother's, or wife's cooking. I can't make friends for you, but I can tell you the world is smaller than ever before. Through social media sites, social travel sites, and making contact through the web, it is easier than ever to find yourself invited into someone's home as you travel. Arrange a homestay and ask for a home cooked meal.

The second way to taste a region is to eat street food. Street food has recently come into the mainstream with travel media companies like *Lonely Planet* publishing world street food guides. Travel writers and journalists are now putting a welcome focus on

VAGO DAMITIO

sampling street food from many regions.

This has led to some scrumptious tasting tours in places like Istanbul, Tokyo, Fez, Modena, Paris and Portland. I'm a fan of the traditional food and wine tours, but tasting tours are something different and delicious. You meet with a guide and wander through the streets of a city visiting markets, lunch wagons, and street vendors. You sample tasty treats along the way.

I'm also a fan of discovering hidden gems on your own, but the benefit of a guide is you can find out about the various foods and techniques, learn about the ingredients, and the guide already knows where to take you. No guess work, just wonderful gastronomy.

In 1999 the serious foodies were in the latest bistro trying that oyster cracker, but today, all the most serious foodies are street foodies. The reason?

The closer to the garden you are, the better the food tastes.

Finding Cheap Delicious Food

I have friends who live and dine by their Zagat's Guides. The problem is, by the time the guide book is published, the restaurant may have changed its character. Not to mention when you go there, every seat is taken by other guide book wielding foodies.

My own method is far simpler and provides universal coverage. Walk the back streets and when you see a place filled with happy smiling locals – have a look at the menu and see if there is something that strikes your fancy. I should emphasize the word *locals* since tourists can be extremely bad at judging value, taste, or quality because they are out of context to the place themselves.

The same method works for coffee shops, bars, street trucks, carts, doughnut shops, and more. The locals know. Easy as that.

Cooking for Yourself

If you want to cook for yourself, the key is to good food is to get the best ingredients. Farmers' markets have become trendy and expensive in the United States and other developed nations. They aren't the best place to get fresh food. The best place is the farm itself. Many farms have retail outlets where you can avoid the markup from the farmers' markets and get the freshest food possible.

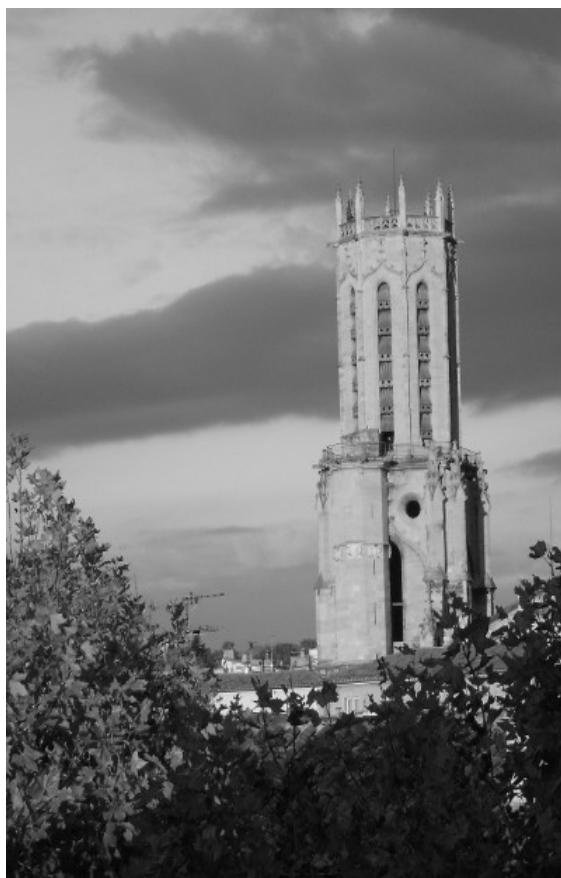
Want to take a lifetime souvenir away from someplace? Take a cooking course while you are there.

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

Natural Resources

If you are at all familiar with the plants that grow in an area, you can enjoy the bounty of nature free of charge. The most nutritious food is undoubtedly the food that grows naturally in a region. If you eat regionally, you will be eating deliciously. You will also be saving the planet since one of the biggest contributors to global warming and pollution is the transportation of food.

Food is essential! For many people, food is reason enough to travel the world. Never forget - without food, we die.



What you've heard is true. Europe is filled with great food.

VAGO DAMITIO

16 MISCELLANEOUS FOOD TIPS

- 1) Look for free fruit on the trees.
- 2) Eat the local food.
- 3) In the developing world be careful of uncooked vegetables, especially salads, fruits you can't peel, undercooked meat, raw shellfish, ice cubes, and drinks made from tap water.
- 4) Eat lots of cheese if you get diarrhea.
- 5) A handful of nuts makes hunger go away.
- 6) Try to make sure the dishes and silverware you use have been cleaned in purified water.
- 7) Drink water you know is safe.
- 8) Clean the part of the container that touches your mouth.
- 9) Boiling water for 3 to 5 minutes purifies it, as does iodine liquid or tablets.
- 10) Drink acidic drinks like colas and orange juice when possible. They help keep down the E.coli count, the bacteria most responsible for digestive distress.
- 11) Drink acidophiles milk or eat yogurt in the weeks before your trip. The bacteria in your digestive system reduce the chance of diarrhea catching you by surprise.
- 12) More cures for the trots: eat clay or ashes, blueberries, plantains, blackberry roots, or acorns. All of these have properties that will cause your diarrhea to disappear.
- 13) If you are clean and look the part, there is no reason you can't have access to resort amenities, continental breakfasts, or other perks of wherever you are - even if you aren't a paying guest.
- 14) Universities have a lot of parties and it's rare for anyone to know everyone in a department.
- 15) There may be more in those brownies on the host's kitchen table than anyone is saying.
- 16) Food at universities is dirt-cheap.

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

TRAVEL MONEY: FINDING CASH ON THE ROAD AND FOR THE ROAD

No matter how bad the economy is, no matter how depressed a place I might live in, no matter where I am - I can always find a way to make a few bucks. Enough to get to somewhere else, take care of my family, and hopefully to have some fun along the way.

Perhaps, this would have been much easier if I had done what so many others have done. Gone to university, found a job, worked my way up the corporate ladder, saved my money, and then taken to the road when it was time to retire. I didn't do that.

I am left with uncertainty surrounding me as I get older. One can hope books, websites, and consulting will continue to take care of my wife and I in our old age. Or maybe our daughter will be a financial genius.

For the moment, however, we are fine and I am confident that I can always get what is needed for us. While we don't earn enough money to live a posh lifestyle in the United States or Europe, we live a fine middle class life in my wife's native Morocco.

This is the first lesson of smooth living. Go where your money goes the furthest. For what a high school fry cook earns in a month, we have a nice apartment, good fresh food, our utilities paid, and enough left to take several long trips abroad each year, travel extensively in Morocco, and sometimes splurge on computers, new phones, tablets, or toys for our baby daughter.

I've never enjoyed having a boss. I'm not cut out for it and that means I don't have the certainty of a retirement, a 401k plan, or health insurance. In the world today, who has any security even with those safety nets in place?

I work for myself. I've created my own job. I'm my own boss and, for better or worse, I'm a self made man. It remains to be seen whether I've

VAGO DAMITIO

made good or not. So far so good.

Heres how myself and others like me earn money without having a boss or a job to go to.

Online Work

Many travelers are having good luck with affiliate marketing and blogging. I've been successful at blogging in terms of people liking my writing and coming again and again to my blog, but I can't say I've had any luck with making money at it (but thanks for the anonymous donations Mom!). Same goes for affiliate marketing.

If you want to earn money online, you need to have a Paypal (paypal.com) account. Sign up for it before you leave wherever you come from. You'll need to have a bank account to connect to it.

If you are a native English speaker and you can write at a high school or college level, you can easily earn \$1-\$2 per 100 words. Go to sites like Digital Point Forums

(<http://forums.digitalpoint.com>) and you will find people from all over the world looking for Native English speakers to write articles about everything in the world for them.

Web Design, Mobile App Design, and Programming

If you can build a website or mobile app, you will find plenty of people around the world that will give you work. You need to find a way to contact them. Find where English speaking expats hang out and start there. Another way is to join MeetUp groups (<http://www.meetup.com>). Don't try to sell to people, but let them know what you do. Don't be afraid to have business cards made. The need is there and they will find you.

Blogging

You can earn money blogging. Sites like ProBlogger (<http://www.problogger.com>) have all the details. You can blog about anything you want though, I think it is better to blog about something you enjoy. Blogging about travel is a popular option, though it has become harder to stand out in the crowd because every person without a job who travels, creates a travel blog. Most income from blogging comes from selling text links, selling advertising, selling eBooks, selling a specific product, or using affiliate marketing. It's not easy. You can expect to do a lot of

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND
work with no compensation for the first year or more. Most of those who go into blogging for money end up leaving it behind for something that pays the bills easier.

Farm Work

Farms all over the world use migrant labor for harvest and planting. If you arrive at the right part of the year, you can always find farm work in exchange for food, shelter, or sometimes cold, hard cash. Farm work isn't easy. The hours are long, the work is dirty and labor intensive, and the pay is minimum wage or less. I have friends who had delightful holiday times picking apples in Australia, pulling potatoes in Idaho, or working in organic olive orchards in Italy and Turkey.

Gambling

Hey...you might be a winner, but you are going to lose. The odds are stacked against you unless you cheat and if you are going to cheat you need to be a good cheater. Lately, I've been seeing a lot of travelers who claim to earn their living by playing poker online. I don't have the money to lose in a game of chance. If you decide to do this, don't blame me.

Digital Nomadism

Today's world is filled with people who are 'location independent'. I'm one of them. My office is on my laptop, smart phone, and in the cloud. I am able to travel anyplace on the planet and still do my work so long as I can get reasonable access to the web. We live in a world where you don't have to go to the office to do your job. Many employers have eliminated the traditional workplace in favor of a digital workplace.

Teaching English

The recent financial crisis in Europe and North America ruined the days of getting a high paying job as a foreign English teacher without having the proper credentials. Thousands of college graduates flooded markets all around the world since they couldn't find jobs at home. As a result, salaries went down, and requirements went up. If you want to get a good job teaching English as a foreign language, you should get at least a BA and a MA in TEFL(Teaching English as a Foreign Language.) For more on this go to Dave's ESL Cafe. (<http://www.eslcafe.com>)

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Tour Promotion

You're an adventurer, right? You have an unquenchable desire to travel the Amazon...or go on a trek through the Sahara by camel...or hike through Philippine jungles...and you don't have the cash, but don't worry.

There's a possibility you can travel for free to anywhere in your heart desires by locating a group of like-minded adventurers and convincing them to go with you. If you choose the right travel company and get enough people to go, you could also earn up to \$10,000 per trip for your efforts. That's not too bad for doing something you love doing, meeting people who enjoy the same traveling you do, and seeing the world. It's easy...but not really.

There are dozens of travel companies who are actively seeking individuals to help them organize tours or promote existing ones. The reason is it's damn difficult to convince 5-20 people to come on any given trip at the same time. Go ahead, give it a try. See if you can get 20 people to come to Morocco or Turkey with you at the same time and I will help you get the trip free (but the other 19 will have to pay full price).

People say age is no consideration, but it is. Whether you are 16 or 70, there are situations and places that won't suit you. When you arrange a trekking trip, you can't invite your friends with small kids or senior citizens. If you are arranging a museum trip, good luck getting your friends under 40 to come along.

Teachers have the best chance to make this travel work. As a result, they can travel free and get some large cash stipends to boot. High school and college students can promote grad trips and spring break trips to their friends and classmates. A successful promoter can pull in serious money...enough to pay for college with 3-4 trips. Why? Because it's not easy and successful promoters are few and far between.

Religious groups are a good niche for this angle, but don't expect to undercut the ministers. Pilgrimages to the Holy Land or Vatican raise as much as \$10,000 per trip for the shepherds flock and the ministers and priests are no dummies. I don't want to discourage you, but I want you to recognize this isn't as easy as posting "Let's take a scuba trip to Australia" on Facebook or Twitter. Lots of people will say yes but few will pony up the cash to go.

If you can get enough people to make reservations, you can travel free and earn some cash. Most travel companies that do this, have a minimum number you must book (and who must pay in advance) for a free trip. If you exceed that number you get cash. Don't count on less than ten although some high end companies will take as few as five. Usually, you

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

need fifteen to twenty people to commit with credit card details or non-refundable cash deposits.

I know people who do it successfully. The travel companies give all the marketing materials you need to 'sell' the trip, but be warned, people love to dream but generally hate to let the cash out of their hands.

Here are a few ideas my friends use: holding meetings or starting an email newsletter about a specific kind of travel, taking out newspaper ads, and, yes, telling people about trips on social media or blogs. The more aggressive they are, the more successful they are. The promoters I've talked with say it takes nine months to a year to organize a successful trip. The key is to require that non-refundable cash deposit. If you don't, people will never find a way to pay for the trip, but it's human nature to hate losing a deposit.

As a tour promoter you work your buns off but in the process you can earn 'free' travel, cash, and have a great time. I wish you luck.



The travel bloggers above are making money by traveling and blogging. It really can be done.

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6 INTERNATIONAL CASH TIPS

If money makes you crazy with worry when you travel, here are a few tips to set your mind at ease.

- 1) Change a small amount of money before you leave your home country for the local currency.
- 2) You'll get the worst rate for exchange at home, I'm not sure why.
- 3) Keep \$100 (or more) in USD, Euros, or British Pounds hidden for emergencies. These are safe currencies you can use about anywhere in the world. I generally have a few hundred dollars hidden in a few different places to cover my ass.
- 4) Don't count on your ATM working or a currency exchange being open and available when you arrive. Sometimes they aren't. This is especially true when you fly into airports serviced by budget airlines.
- 5) Make sure you know your PIN numbers by heart. There's little 's worse than having your card shut down because you used the wrong pin. It's a good idea to give your pin to someone you trust back at home.
- 6) ATMs often offer the most competitive rates. My recommendation is to forget about traveler's checks. You lose on both ends with them and often you can't use them in restaurants, many hotels, or guest houses.

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

30 TIPS FOR TRAVEL SECURITY

Nobody wants to have an unsafe trip. Here are a few keys to traveling safely- some of these are too paranoid to use, but by considering them, you will understand some of the dangers you may face on the road.

1. Never list your home address on the luggage tag. If on business, put the company's address on the tag; if you have friends where you are going, use their address. Use covered luggage tags.
2. Stay with your luggage until the luggage is checked. If you must put your bag down, keep one foot on it.
3. Carry essential papers with you; NEVER check anything you cannot afford to lose. Photocopy your passport, driver's license and credit cards.
4. Bring a small flashlight. You never know when you'll find yourself in unfamiliar surroundings without light. At night, keep your flashlight by your bed.
5. Make sure prescription medicines are filled properly and labeled accurately. In some countries certain prescription medicines are forbidden. Do your research.
6. Never wear anything that screams bling. No gold chains, expensive watches or rings, fancy pants luggage, or other paraphernalia should be in easy view. Leave your bling at home.
7. If possible travel with only one or two credit cards. Do you need more?
8. Women particularly should never accept a drink from a stranger. Keep an eye on your drink.
9. Vary your schedule; try not to come and go at the same time everyday.
10. Hotels that use cards to open room doors are more secure. Make sure your room has a peephole and a deadbolt lock. Secure the chain and

VAGO DAMITIO

secure the door by pushing a rubber stop under it.

11. Never take the elevator if there is a fire.
12. Do not wear name tags in public. "Hello, my name is Dumbass!"
13. Do not use unmarked taxi cabs unless there is no other choice.
14. Sit behind the driver so you can see him, but he cannot see you.
15. Pay the driver while you are still sitting in the taxi.
16. Rent cars from reputable companies.
17. Be aware of 'staged' car accidents meant to capture hostages.
18. Back into your parking spaces so you can get away quickly.
19. Park in lit and well-traveled areas.
20. If your cell phone doesn't work outside of the country, buy a budget-friendly one that does.
21. If detained by an official, ask for identification. If in doubt, tell them you want to see their superior. Carry a photocopy of your passport and give them that instead of the real one.
22. If traveling with children, bring along an updated photograph of each child.
23. Give an emergency card to each child with your child's name, hotel number, and a close friend's or relative's contact information on the card. Make them carry it while you are traveling.
24. Tell your family what they should do in an emergency. Make sure they are prepared.
25. Do not discuss travel plans, your room number, or any other personal information in public.
26. Bring a basic first aid kit with bandages, iodine, mosquito repellent, sunscreen, alcohol packets, Dramamine, Pepto Bismol, and diarrhea medicine.
27. Know train and bus schedules before traveling. Have an alternate plan because transportation plans can change.
28. Do not flash your passport in public. Discreetly show your documents if you must.
29. Portable screech alarms are awesome.
30. If you get robbed by gun or knife point. Stay calm and give them your valuables. Is your phone, wallet or passport worth your life? Or your family's? Here is a bonus tip – if you run away screaming, most people won't chase you. Most people won't try to shoot you. It's really hard to hit a moving target and most people don't have the skill to do so. Never forget the power of running. Also, never forget how stupid it is to respond to violence with violence. Make violence your very last resort.

MEANS OF TRAVEL

The smoothest living involves private jets, yachts, and chauffeur driven limousines, but let's face it – if you can afford that, you aren't reading this book. In reality, you probably don't get that treatment unless we have tons of money or powerful connections.

The question is, how do you travel?

Transportation is generally shitty unless you are in the situation above. There is a certain price point most of us don't, won't, or can't go above. It involves paying two or three times the standard price to get somewhere more comfortably. It's called first-class.

Airlines and Travel Hacking

You know those movies where people in first-class are drinking champagne and having a jolly-old time while everyone else gets squished between two fat seatmates and eats leftovers? That's the way it is.

First-class is expensive. The easy solution is to pay for it. The slightly harder, but much cheaper, solution is to find a job that pays for it. The more difficult, but ultimately cheaper, way to travel first-class is to delve into 'travel hacking' which involves using credit cards, points, miles, and incentives to get yourself into first class every time.

I'd love to tell you how to do that but, I don't have any credit cards. When I fly, I usually go ultra budget and those kinds of airlines don't give you points or miles. In fact, they don't give you anything except a seat and the chance to use the bathroom. Everything else has to be paid for separately.

Wait a minute! I said this was smooth living? What happened to telling you how to do everything to have a smooth life?

Here's the deal, don't waste your money on expensive flights and don't waste your time on time and money consuming travel hacking. Instead,

VAGO DAMITIO

do what I do – book the cheapest flight possible, suffer through it, and then enjoy spending the money you saved somewhere else.

Example: You want to go from Spain to Turkey.

First-class flight: \$2000 each way

Standard flight: \$800 each way

Travel hacking: Months of planning and collecting points, learning which airlines accept them and then getting your first class seat

Smooth Way #1: Buy a RyanAir (<http://www.ryanair.com>) ticket for \$15 from Barcelona to Rome. Enjoy a day or two in Rome, suffer for a few hours as RyanAir tries to sell you everything from smokeless cigs to scratch cards. Buy an Air Pegasus (<http://www.flypgs.com>) ticket for \$70 from Rome to Istanbul. Enjoy Istanbul for as long as you want.

Smooth Way #2: Buy a RyanAir Ticket from Barcelona to Kos in Greece for \$25 and suffer through the flight. Lie on the beach, drink cheap beers, and grab a hotel for a few days while you enjoy the good life. Take a ferry to Bodrum for \$40. Enjoy yourself more.

Let's face it – flying sucks. No matter what. Suffer through it and find the cheapest way. In both my scenarios, I enjoyed a couple days of exploring places for less time and money than any of the other three options. When it comes down to it time is money.

Cars

Using private cars to take you from place to place doesn't cost much in many countries. It's an arm and a leg in Western Europe, the USA, and other fully industrialized societies, but in the Philippines, Turkey, or Morocco – you can get a luxury car and driver for less than the cost of renting a car.

Renting cars by the way, is great. Unless, like me, you don't have a credit card. This means in a lot of Western Europe and the US, I can't rent a car. In the rest of the world, I can rent a car for \$20 per day. Be careful though, gas is never as cheap as it is in the USA so don't be surprised when it costs \$200 to fill up the tank of an economy car.

Boats

I love boats. Learn to sail, become an able crewman, and you can find you can find a boat looking for someone like you going anywhere boats go. It's hard to find boats in landlocked places, but when you are near sea, go to the marina and ask around. I haven't sailed as much as I want

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

to, but I've sailed in the Greek Aegean, the Hawaiian Pacific, the Turkish Riviera, the wild Pacific of Alaska, and through the islands of the Pacific Northwest without having to pay a dime.

Here's one of the caveats of this book – you can't do exactly what I do, because you aren't me. You have to find your own way. This book is designed to give ideas and get you thinking outside of the box. It's not a road map to living my life.

Take cruises for instance. I'm not (yet) a cruise person. Some of the writers at Vagabond (<http://www.vagabond.com>) love to cruise. And guess what? They've taken cruises all over the world without paying for them. I'm not talking about cheap, crappy cruises. I'm talking about five-star cruises with fine wine, full service bespoke day trips, and amazing activities. Sure, they're travel writers. If you write about travel, you get to do a lot of smooth living because you pay for it with your writing – but you can pay less in other ways. After the Italian cruise ship disaster, I saw five-star cruises going for \$25 per night and which included everything but the alcohol.

I have friends who have taken freighters around the world for a few hundred dollars. I was told, post 9-11, the freighter option had gone away. That information was incorrect. The freight ships have enhanced their liners to be more comfortable for passengers. There is some red tape and it's not a perfect situation every time, but all in all, it's something on my bucket list.

Trains

Train travel is my favorite way to see the not-so-wet parts of the world. Generally trains are budget-friendly, have great windows, you can get up, stretch your legs, buy a snack or take a nap without the inconvenience of being in a tin can flying through the air.

You can buy a bedroom on a train and surprisingly, it's not much more expensive than a standard hotel room that doesn't take you anywhere. First-class train travel is worth the extra money, although I have to admit some of my favorite train experiences have been riding in the cheap seats where I met locals in China and Thailand. In Morocco, I like to have air conditioning. That only comes with first-class.

Buses

Bus travel can be awful or good but is rarely great. Cheap buses in Morocco, China, and India will cram as many people as they can with no regard for the number of seats available. A Turkish bus line like Pamukkale (<http://www.pamukkale.tr>) will serve you tea and coffee,

VAGO DAMITIO

provide WiFi on board, provide video games, movies and television installed in the seat-backs, and give you plenty of breaks to stretch your legs.

I like bus travel, but the last time I was in North America (back in 2009), the Greyhound buses were still stinky vehicles filled with people who I didn't trust to leave my bag with when I went to the toilet. The other problem in the USA has always been the bus stations. Generally, located in the most dangerous parts of town. Bus stations tend to be places where you are likely to get ripped off whether you are in Europe, North America, Africa, Asia, or South America. By the way, I've heard (but not yet experienced) South American buses are even better than Turkish buses. I find that hard to believe but I look forward to finding out.

Slow Travel

I like the concept of slow travel. If you aren't in a hurry to get anywhere, slow travel is the best way to see the world. Slow travel means you don't skip the areas between the starting point and the destination. The slower you travel, the more you see. For slow travel, airplanes are out. The slower the better.

Walking – My walk around Oahu taught me more about the island I lived on than anything else I did there.

Biking – you can only go so far and sometimes you have to stop in the in-between places – that's where you find the magic.

Kayaking and Sailing – sure, it's nice to be in a power boat, but check out the tranquility you find as you glide through the waters.

In general, slow travel is an ethic that requires taking your time to enjoy the world. You choose not to cram as many sites or activities into your annual two week vacation as possible.

Hitchhiking

I don't do as much hitching as before I was married, but I still enjoy sticking out my thumb and seeing who I meet. Here are some of my hitching tips from Rough Living.

Minimize your risk if you choose to stick out your thumb.

- (1) Trust your instincts...ask where someone is going when they stop, before you get in their car. If anything (like crushed beer cans on the floor, a smell, the way they talk, or a gut-feeling) makes you nervous then come up with a reason not to get in. Don't get in the car if anything tells you not to.

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

- (2) Keep your bag where you are riding.
- (3) Tell the person you are expected someplace up the road and mention you recently talked to someone from where they picked you up (even if you haven't.)
- (4) If you become nervous, ask to be let off. Insist on being let off.
- (5) I rarely accept invitations to stay at someone's house, shower, or have a meal unless I know the person has no ulterior motive. Why put yourself in a wolf's den unnecessarily? All I want is a ride.
- (6) Get to know the person, ask questions, and talk to them about them rather than about you. A ride is not the time to get on your soapbox, so if you disagree with a person, don't tell them they are wrong about anything. If you disagree so much about something you can't contain yourself, ask them to pull over and get out of the car.

There are a few specifics that can increase your chances of getting a ride. Nobody wants to pick up someone who smells bad or looks like they don't take care of themselves. Pick the spot you hitch from with care. Make sure there is an area drivers can pull safely off the road past you. Have a sign that says where you want to go.

Local Transport

Local transport is one of the great joys of travel. Commuter trains, shared cabs, minibuses, bicycles, and the always available feet. Cabs are easy, but you won't get much more than a rip-off with most of them. Sometimes you meet a great cabby though and...they are almost universally safe.

Finding Transport Deals

It's not always easy to find the discounts when you want to travel the world. The time you have to travel may not line up with the low season (which is when you find the discounts for travel). Every year middle class American families put off traveling because they're too busy, too tired ,or they don't have enough money to go anywhere that sounds interesting.

We can all relate to that. Traveling can be expensive. However, if you know where to look, many discounts are readily available through the internet, newspapers, and the yellow pages. It's not to late for you and your family to take amazing vacations that will recharge your battered soul, stimulate the kids minds, and create memories to last a lifetime.

VAGO DAMITIO

Airfare is one of the most expensive and unavoidable necessities of travel. To get discounts on your next ticket here are a few easy tips. First of all, leave or return in the middle of the week. Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday. Don't book a return for less than one week from departure if you want reduced fares.

Look to nearby alternate airports for departure or arrival dates to see if they offer cheaper prices. If your plans are flexible, there is always a chance you will get bumped for a cash reward or free ticket. As airline service has gone from bad to worse, this perk is far more rare than it used to be..

Search through the discount travel sites online to find bargains. Check fares on budget airlines and the websites of the commercial carriers. There are a wide variety of reverse bidding sites these days and don't forget to see what you can do with your airline miles. (<http://www.priceline.com>)

Once you have the airfare sorted, it's time to figure out ground transportation. Travel by bus, train, or automobile can add up. One increasingly popular choice is to rent an RV and combine ground transport and hotel (since you sleep in the RV). This is economical and fun. As always, search for deals online and don't be afraid to look at non-traditional sites for ideas about how to get from point A to point B for less. A friend of mine buys RV's on Craigslist when he goes somewhere, does some minor repairs, and then sells them when he leaves – almost always for a profit. (<http://www.craigslist.com>).



The best yacht to travel on is a friend's yacht. Thanks Graham!

WHAT'S IN YOUR LUGGAGE?

What you need, you can generally find wherever you are going – if you end up needing it at all.

It never ceases to amaze me is how much garbage some people bring with them when they travel. It isn't just tourists but also some self-righteous backpackers who claim to be travelers (there is no difference between a tourist and a traveler). Every time I travel, I see some idiot backpacker with a huge rucksack on their back, a day pack on their front, and a shopping bag filled with lunch or other goodies in their hands. Sometimes, they have a wheelie bag they drag behind them too!

The tourist couple with two 40-kilo bags is just as bad. I admit, I no longer have to wonder what in the world they have in their bags, because since I married, I've learned. My wife isn't like me and she won't listen to me when I offer her travel advice. She doesn't like to travel for long periods, she doesn't like to have her options wide open, and she doesn't like to leave home without everything she might need.

I'm happy if you understand what I'm saying because my wife doesn't get it, but then, you've bought this book so you must be interested. She didn't marry me for my travel skills.

We recently took a trip to Turkey. I planned on three months of travel and exploration. As usual, I packed a shoulder bag that weighed right around six kilos (1 kg=2.2 lbs so my bag weighed about 13 pounds) including my netbook, my important paperwork (for work), and a couple changes of clothes. I packed a bag for our baby which came out to about 8 (about 18 lbs) kilos including diapers, clothes, toys, and more.

My wife's bag weighed 40 kilos (88 lbs). She included a couscous pot, olives, a liter of olive oil, couscous, Moroccan henna, Moroccan tea, fifteen changes of clothes, beauty products, medicines (just in case), five pairs of shoes, and too many other things to list here. I (unfairly in her opinion) made her leave most of it behind and we whittled her bag down

VAGO DAMITIO

to 18 kilos (about 40 lbs).

Pre-baby, I insisted she carry her own bag. It made her pack lighter than if she knew I would carry it for her. People told me I was being a jerk when I made her shoulder her heavy bag, but there was a reason and it worked.

Post-baby, she's figured a way around that rule. She insists on carrying the baby (about 7 kilos) and I'm left schlepping her overweight bag, mine, and the baby's bag too. Yeah, I've become the guy carrying a massive amount of bullshit as I try to get down the airline aisle. I understand that poor guy now. It's not his fault. His wife won't listen to reason.

To get her to leave things behind, I told her to bring old clothes or to not bring necessities and then she would be able to get new stuff to replace it. The idea is, you buy what you need as you go along. Your 'souvenirs' tend to fit into that category too. My wife liked that idea and when we arrived to snow in Istanbul, I found out she'd left her coat behind so she could get a new one.

We have very different ideas about what 'need' means. She needed a hot wax machine when she saw one in Istanbul – even if it meant adding weight to her bag. When I asked what she was getting rid of, she said "Nothing." By the time we were ready to go home, her bag weighed 100 kilos. The baggage restriction was 30 kilos. All that stuff she needed is still in our friend's basement in Istanbul.

I'm telling you this for a reason beyond amusing you or gaining your sympathy. The more weight you have, the less likely you are to enjoy your trip – unless you are one of those people who can travel with a personal sherpa (like my wife). My wife didn't enjoy me saying no to most of her necessities and I didn't enjoy carrying her unnecessary bullshit around. The easy solution?

Don't have a bunch of unnecessary bullshit. Don't buy junk you don't need – including wax machines and souvenirs until the end of the trip. It took me years to realize I don't need to bring much with me. I hope this can save you the trouble.

For clothing, the first rule is bring clothes and gear that will work together in a variety of ways. You may love one outfit but if it doesn't go with anything else, you are wasting space. Make sure your pants can go with all of your shirts.

My Typical Packing List
Netbook, adapters, and plug, phone, and charger, 2 changes of clothes, swim trunks, 2 extra t-shirts, socks, underwear, Kindle, toothbrush, journal/notebook and pen, camera, charger, and adapters, 1 pair of shoes,

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

passport and debit cards, a sarong (I use it for many purposes).

It's ten simple essentials. My Swiss Army knife stays home since I use a simple shoulder carry-on bag. I've had to abandon it because of security which totally sucks.

For souvenirs, I keep my eye open for one durable, light-weight memento that won't take up much space. One souvenir per trip. I buy gifts the day before I go home.

The hardest part of staying light (aside from being married), is turning down gifts from friends and hosts. I've had hosts offer me books, crockery, stones, bottles, and other heavy or bulky items.

Wear your 'heaviest' clothes when you fly. For me that's the loafers, button down shirt, and trousers. That way you have a lighter bag to comply with carry-on regulations.

In twenty years of travel, I've never had my wallet stolen. The reason? I don't have one. Sometimes I carry a cash card or my ID wrapped with a rubber band but that's hard to lift out of a front pocket. Cash goes in the front pockets too. Nothing essential or important goes in my back pockets. If I have my jacket, everything I value is in an inside pocket buttoned shut. The most important equipment and paperwork goes in my shoulder bag, which is sturdy leather and buckled shut. It would be very difficult to open or cut it without me noticing. I wear it over a shoulder and across my body so no one can yank it off me.



This is my heavy bag. Mainly because of the rock on top.

VAGO DAMITIO

BAG STORAGE ON THE ROAD

Sometimes you may find yourself in a city that wasn't on your agenda. There can be a few reasons for this:

- A layover, canceled, or missed flight
- A bus breaking down
- Random chance

Make the most of your time in the city or town you didn't plan on being in. The big impediment is you have your luggage or gear with you. Don't lug it around while you explore. Use this vagabond tip to overcome that challenge.

Most bus stations, train stations, and some airports offer lockers or bag storage for short term. For a few dollars you can leave your bag in safety and wander around, have lunch, take photos, or take a nap without worrying what is happening to your equipment and paperwork. Shopping malls also usually offer bag storage. You don't even have to stay there.

If you need to go out and find a hotel or hostel, it's considerably easier without your baggage.. What if there isn't a locker or bag storage available?

Easy. Hotels and hostels often offer free bag storage for their guests so they can check out but not have to carry their bags with them. You don't have to be a guest to store your bag! Pop into a hotel or hostel and ask if you can leave your bag with them for an hour, a day, or even longer. Often they won't charge you but if they do, it will be a couple of bucks. Higher priced hotels tend to be more friendly about this than hostels. Hostels are cheaper and as a result, the guests often get treated badly. As for non-guests - you don't get any respect -generally. So, you are better off picking a fancy place than a dive or hostel.

Without baggage you can visit museums, tourist attractions, restaurants, or make arrangements for your next leg of travel and enjoy your exploration..

TRAVELING WITH A BABY

Having a newborn baby completely changes any life - more so if you travel a lot. But then again, a life disrupted is a life disrupted - no matter how joyful the disruption itself may be. My wife's nationality (Moroccan) gets more in the way of our traveling as a family than the fact our daughter needs to be cared for. The baby has a U.S. Passport and is free to travel most of the world without a visa. My wife needs to get expensive and time consuming visas. Traveling with a baby is fun.

Here are ten tips to make travel with a baby easier, more fun, and less of a headache. Long distance travel with kids can be incredibly rewarding.

1) Infants less than 4 weeks should not travel by plane. Their bodies can't adjust to the air pressure. It is also not advised (or allowed) for late term pregnancies to travel by plane. After 4 weeks, you're all clear.

2) Know the baggage allowance. Trains and buses often let children travel free and with no notice, buy you must notify airlines and buy infant tickets. Infants are often not allowed a baggage allowance which is idiotic considering you need to bring the nappy bag, clothes, and baby toys.

3) Sit in the front. Find a seat that offers extra legroom. Trust me.

4) Baby travel documents. Just because she or he is a baby doesn't mean that the governments of the world don't want to see identity papers, visa's, and passports. Get all the baby's paperwork in order ASAP.

5) Ask about changing facilities and if you are allowed to bring a stroller.

6) Pack more diapers, baby wipes, bibs, and what-not into your bag than you think you will need. Ever get stuck in the airport longer than you expected? Ever done it with a screaming baby and no clean diapers? Yeah, be prepared.

7) Dress yourself and the baby in layers and dark clothing you don't mind throwing away. Expect to be puked on, shit on, or pissed on.

VAGO DAMITIO

Taking off a layer is easier than changing...

8) Breastfeeding during takeoff or landing helps babies deal with the pressure changes. A bottle with formula also works. Our daughter chews gum which is really weird for a one-year-old.

9) Bring extra bottles, extra formula, and by all means get a pacifier (bobo) - even if your infant strictly breast feeds, you will be glad to have the formula when your wife needs to take a nap (assuming like me, you are a man and don't lactate.)

10) Finally, like me, you may find this one nulls and voids all the above hard won knowledge. Make sure your wife is following through on her visa because she's not going to let you take the baby to Paris without her. Your wife may tell you everything is fine and it's coming, but it's better to make sure of it yourself.

Enjoy the time with your baby and happy travels. Or like me, enjoy your time in Paris while your wife and the baby are visiting Grandma.



SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

QUICK GUIDE TO FINDING FREE INTERNET

Have a WiFi enabled laptop, netbook, phone, or tablet that can search for open connections

Check public libraries, cafes, and anywhere else you see people using laptops. City parks often have free WiFi.

Find a free unlocked connection and connect.. Ask the cafe or library if they have the password available.

Code of Conduct for Public Internet Use

There is an unwritten (until now) code of conduct among WiFi users.

Don't ask to use someone's device.

Don't try to hack into the router and change the password.

Don't tap into other people's data stream.

If you are going to look at the internet in public, be sure it is kid and family friendly since you never know when a young kid will suddenly come up and look over your shoulder.

Don't look over people's shoulders at their work unless you are less than 12 years old.

THE PEOPLE OF THE ROAD

This section pokes some of the people you might meet on the road. You might be one of them! While this is mostly written with 'tongue in cheek' there is truth to each description which - if you've been on the road before, you will see. My apologies to friends and readers who fall into these categories – in fact, I've fallen into several of these categories myself over the course of my travels. I might be the worst person you could meet of them all.

People to Find

There are millions of people who are worth meeting and talking to, if only to hear their perspectives on life, travel, love, or Wifi codes of conduct. You will know them when you meet them.

Great people on the road tend to be:

- ! artists
- ! writers
- ! musicians
- ! foodies
- ! NGO employees
- ! fellow travelers

People to Avoid

There are also people it is worth going out of your way to avoid. Here are a few of them:

Backpacker Elitists

People aged 18-50 who think because they are traveling the world with a backpack on their back, they are better than anyone who travels with other luggage. While these people can be interesting and have some good stories to tell, the conversations inevitably lead to the tourist vs.

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND
traveler debate. They are (they say) not tourists though they use the same transportation, hostels, hotels, tour guides, and Lonely Planet guidebooks as the tourists they despise. You can recognize them by the backpacks on front and back (front-packs?).

Travel Bloggers

(The name is given as a job description when you ask what they do)
These people are created when you give a Backpacker Elitist a laptop, an iPhone, and a blog. The problem isn't that they blog or they travel – both activities are worthwhile. The problem is when they say (and they will tell you whether you ask or not) – “I'm a Travel Blogger” (with capital T & B) – what they are saying is *“I'm an obnoxious self-promoter who decided to leave my important job where I was absolutely the best who had ever done that important job. I left could find myself and help all the sweet (but not as smart as me) people of the world solve their problems by seeing how great my life is and how clever, witty, and better than everyone else I am (but not judgmental, no, I'm a traveller (use two L's because it's the British spelling) not a tourist. By the way, it's difficult and I work hard and have to be on Facebook and Twitter every day and every hour to connect with the people who worship me, my 'fans', who, by the way, you should become one of. Have you bought my eBook yet? How to Travel like Hobo Joe? You should travel, but of course you should do it the way I tell you to, because did I mention what I do is very difficult? I'm a Travel Blogger!”*

Chinese, Serbian, American, or Aussie Rednecks

A redneck is someone who hates you because you are different than they are. If you don't share their beliefs and values, you are the enemy. I don't know why these people travel. It's not only the nationalities I listed above. There are rednecks from every country and many of them have taken to the international road. I have no idea why. The bottom line is, it's a waste of time to associate with rednecks. Go find someone who appreciates your differences.

International MBA's and Fulbright Scholars

While not as annoying or dangerous as any of the groups above, the MBA or Fulbright Scholarship Recipient can be overwhelming as they inundate you with their research and tell you about the trials and

VAGO DAMITIO

wonders of studies in a foreign land. Many of these people can be interesting, but the warning signs to look out for are:

- ! dressing in traditional costumes of the lands they live in (not the land they're from)
- ! Che Guevara t-shirts
- ! Americans who tell you they are 'from' whatever foreign city they happen to be studying in

Expats

I once believed the expat communities were the most interesting collections of human beings. There are many interesting expats, but most I've met fall into these categories

- ! post-colonialist colonials
- ! past their prime women or men looking for love
- ! pedophiles
- ! merciless capitalists looking for the chance to make profits through exploitation
- ! career TEFL teachers

Energy Vampires

The description of Energy Vampires from *Rough Living*.

Energy vampires are everywhere. Spot them is when they first approach you (they always approach you). They will say they want to be your best friend. If someone wants to be your friend for no apparent reason, they are an energy vampire.

Energy vampires like to be the center of conversation. They draw the life out of any conversation with constant interruptions and meaningless stories no one wants to hear. If an energy vampire is in your midst, you might notice the people you want to talk with no longer hang out when you show up with your new best friend.

Energy vampires often pose as hippies because hippies are the most likely to let an energy vampire suck off them for an extended period. Energy vampires feed off positive vibes in order to get attention they don't deserve. They hit everyone up for whatever they can get while offering nothing in return. Learn to recognize them. Tell them bluntly you don't want to be their friend. There is no antidote except to make them find another victim.

THE ART OF CONVERSATION WITH GRUMPY EXPATS

One perk of traveling with no guidebook is it gives you a valid excuse to strike up conversations with other foreigners you might meet while traveling. Some of my favorite discoveries were on the advice of local expats. I met in random places. A two minute conversation can lead you to Kipu Falls, the House Hotel in Sokcho, South Korea, hidden restaurants on Istanbul's Prince's Islands, or a natural hot spring in the Sahara. Talk to the foreigners who live wherever in the world you might go. It's worth the time.

As a small aside, I have lived in countries where I was not born. There isn't much more annoying than someone saying "Hi, I'm a foreigner too. I'm a tourist on vacation, where are you from?" This is one reason I recommend and use the approach below. I suggest you use it and develop your own angle or you can expect to be snubbed by jerks like me who left their countries to avoid energy vampires.

Me: Excuse me. Do you live here? (This is far better than asking "Are you a tourist?" since grumpy expats tend to think of most tourists as a step below pond scum. Even if they don't live there, they will be flattered you thought they might.)

Expat: (cautiously) Ughhh (Don't expect more than a grunt since we have no idea what you want. We are used to being hit up by art students who want to 'practice their English', merchants who offer a 'free' cup of tea, and locals who frequently see us as cash machines. Also, keep in mind expats choose to live away from their countrymen so saying "Hi, I'm American and you look American too." is the wrong approach.)

Me: Sorry to bother you, but I'm traveling without a guidebook and

VAGO DAMITIO

going by the recommendations of people I meet. Since you look like you live here, can I ask you a question?

Expat: (gruffly) What's your question? (All of this is assuming we speak your language. It's also assuming you're not a hot young woman or George Clooney type which makes life much easier. So I've been told, anyway.)

Me: Oh, nothing much. I wondered if you could recommend a restaurant nearby that serves great food at a reasonable price. (The truth is, you want much more information than that, but everyone has a restaurant they like and most people aren't scared to share that information)

Expat: (Warming up) **Oh, is that all? Sure, there's a great place over there called something or other.**

Me: Sounds great. I'll check it out. Thanks. Bye. (Wait a minute, I want more info, right? Right! The key is to give the grumpy expat the chance to discover questions they want to ask you by prematurely ending the conversation and staring out the train window, sitting on a nearby bench, or sitting at a nearby table in Starbucks...)

This process is about demonstrating you are not an energy vampire. Let a few minutes pass so the grumpy expat begins to wonder "Wow, that was it? I wonder where this person is from? Why are they traveling with no guidebook? What other tips have they learned from the locals? Is that it?"

It takes someone to start a conversation and the first conversation is the hardest. By keeping it simple, you open the door and make it easier for the other person to approach you. You demonstrate you are not a threat and you make yourself both interesting and approachable as a result.

At this point, one of three outcomes occurs. 1) The person will be glad to be rid of you so easily and will leave 2) The person will take the bold move of striking up further conversation by asking something simple like "Where are you from?" "Why are you here?" "Why do you travel with no guidebook?" In this case, you can jump wholeheartedly into the conversation. 3) They may need more reassurance or might need you to start the follow up conversation (for example: Excuse me, sorry to bother

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND
you again, but I want to take a short day trip from town, can you
recommend anyplace?)



Talking to people is the key to smooth living.

32 MISCELLANEOUS TIPS FOR SMOOTH LIVING

1) Instead of paying to go into museums, find the nearest university and take a walk through their libraries, galleries, and ethnographic collections. FREE and you might find a lecture.

2) The old book locker trick. I look for the least interesting, dog eared, worthless looking book I can find. Something no one would want to read, but still conceivable you are carrying around. Something like "*My life with my Aunt Vera*" or a similarly non-compelling title. Slice the centers of 100-150 pages out, leaving the borders so you have a hollow pocket inside about the size of your passport. Glue or tape it the pocket.. Voila. A piece of velcro can be used to keep it shut. Be sure not to use duct tape as it tests positive with those chemical wipes they use at customs for heroin! I learned the hard way entering Nova Scotia.

3) Cut a small hole in the inside of the waist band of your pants, roll up a couple of hundred dollar bills and push them in. Most waist bands of jeans or slacks are made of two strips of material sewn together. A mugger might take your belt, but they won't think to take your pants.

4) Let go of routine that arises from trying to control your trajectory on the road of travel and life. The best thing about living is new experience and you can have as many as you want for free. Once you step away from your socially imposed responsibilities, you find the world opens up and gives you more joy than you'll ever find trying to buy your future security at the expense of the present.

When you start breaking free of your routine, you will discover the wonder of new faces and places, taste delicious new foods, and discover secrets about yourself and the world you never expected to find. Each

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

new wonder unfolds before you like a road that was hidden from view. Like any road, a new experience often leads you to another and another and another. When you walk the road of travel, you get to experience life differently from when you take a package vacation or go through the daily motions in your 'home'. In fact, the world is your home, if you choose to accept it.

5) Sunsets are free. Mountaintops don't cost a thing. Walking through a public market takes not a dime. Striking up a conversation with someone working beside a road you are walking down can lead to adventures you can't imagine. Just being in a new place will provide you with more insights about yourself and the world than all the new clothes, fancy meals, or well rehearsed tourist trips can ever give you.

6) Modern nation states are built on a simple lie. That lie tells you unless you can pay for new goods and services your life won't be worth anything. It's complete and total crap. Maslow's hierarchy of needs shows what you need. Food, sleep, air, defecation, and a sense of who you are. That's it. The rest is luxury and as such is not necessary. In fact, it often gets in the way. Nobody is charging you to breathe. Water can be found for free about everywhere on the planet (though it may take a little umm...digestive adjustment), if there isn't a free toilet, you can defecate on the ground, and if you don't know who you are, isn't it time you found out? You don't need a therapist to tell you. You need to take the time to ask yourself and listen for an answer. Companionship, love, self esteem, and security can be found for close to nothing. Start a conversation with a stranger and I can promise you if you are looking for food or shelter, you will find them. If not with the first person you talk to than with the next, or the next, or the next. With someone.

7) Contrary to popular belief, people are GOOD and they want to help each other. Unless you are a real ass, you'll find people take joy in being a part of your life.

8) You can trade time for money, give it away for free, or waste it being a pissed off grumpy asshole but you can't buy it, you can only sell it.

9) Chill out man. Take it easy. The slower you move the less money it takes. Think about it, if you want to get a ticket to wherever you want to go today and then come back in three days, you have to pay a premium. However, if you slow it down and make it for a departure in a month and staying indefinitely...it's cheaper. Now how about if you walk there....take a year to get there.

10) The key to mastering the art of world travel on almost nothing is learning to trust strangers and let them become friends.

VAGO DAMITIO

11) Smile at the world and the world will smile back at you. Seriously, far too many people don't smile. A smile invites people to help you. A smile invites people to love you.

12) Let people help you. Let people love you. I know, you want to be a rugged traveler that doesn't need anyone, but human beings build relationships through helping each other. Let someone help you find a place, accept the offer of a stranger, ask for help when you need it.

13) Help other people. Don't expect anything in return but when you see someone drop something, help them pick it up. If you find a wallet, make it a quest to find the owner and return it. Help an old lady up some stairs. Rewards will follow...but don't expect them.

14) Be the first to visit a place. I know, it sounds impossible, but every town has cafes only the locals know. In every country there are creeks or cities where tourists have never been. In the entire world, there are places you've never heard of. Make these your mission.

15) Fear is your friend. Fear is your body's way of giving you a warning. Pay attention to it. Know what it is. Learn to count backwards from three and ask yourself if you need to be afraid of this or not. Overcoming your fear is a rush. Listening to your fear and not getting killed is a better rush.

16) Don't be rigid. The joy of travel allows us to become something different than we have always been. Open yourself up to new ideas. If you automatically say no, you will miss something.

17) Remember to ask question about the people you are talking with. It's far too easy to start talking about yourself. We are all our own favorite subject. People you meet will ask you questions. Answer them, be brief, and ask them about themselves. They are their own favorite thing to talk about.

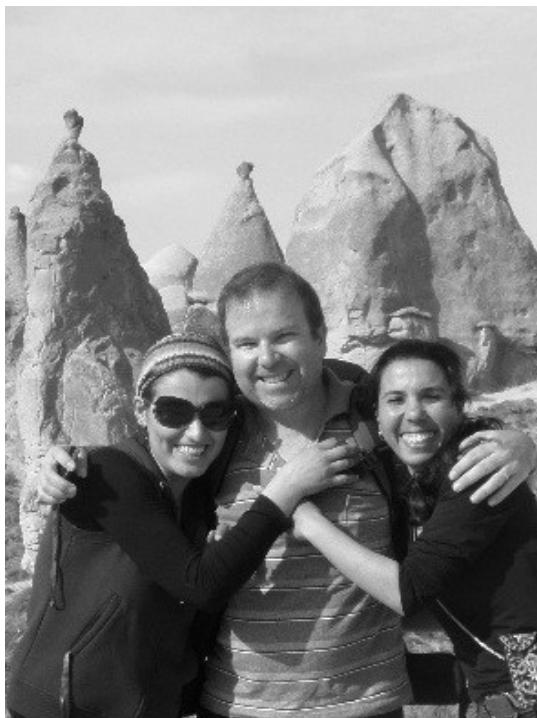
18) READ! If you don't like to read, you will have a less enjoyable time than those that do. You will have times when you have to spend hours waiting for something. A book can make that time a joy. If you read about the places you are going or have been, you will find your travel more fulfilling. Don't read the guidebook, read a story about a bar in Tangier and then walk into the place two days later. Fiction, biography, travel memoirs, or holy books like the Q'uran (if you are visiting a Muslim country). All of them will give you insight into the places you are visiting.

19) Say hi to other people who are traveling. Say hi to people who aren't traveling. Say hi.

20) Nobody is impressed by your cash or flash. Keep it on the down-low.

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

- 21) Catch a cab and talk to the driver about interesting places and activities to do (Cabbies are nearly always multi-lingual.)
- 22) Scan a picture of your passport and email it to yourself.
- 23) Get a nice padlock and use it when necessary (It takes two to steal: the thief and the one who left an opportunity.) The Arab proverb says "Trust God but always tie your camel."
- 24) Wear long pants during long transport.
- 25) Find paperback exchanges in cities you've never been to. Have a paperback.
- 26) Look for language exchanges. Language exchanges in bars are the best.
- 27) Don't get so drunk you can't take care of yourself. Ever.
- 28) Trust your instincts about people. Always.
- 29) Always ask for a lower price (unless you are the seller)
- 30) Don't wander around alone late at night.
- 31) Wander around alone in the early morning.
- 32) Get a haircut and a shave (or a wax and a style.)



HOW NOT TO ENJOY SMOOTH LIVING

I dedicate this section to all the miserable wretches who truly believed they were going on the adventure of a lifetime but ended up having the worst time of their lives.

I've written a lot about how to enjoy smooth living and how to increase the ways that travel can fulfill you. This is how to have a miserable time when you are on the road. I've lived in quite a few tourist destinations, run hostels, and interacted with thousands of travelers, tourists, nomads, vagabonds, and gypsies over the years I've seen too many people who are making themselves as miserable as possible. In fact, I've done it a time or two myself.

Get drunk all the time. Party like a miserable suicidal rock star.

It's nice to have some drinks now and then. It's nice to throw caution to the wind and get blotto and see if you wake up in the morning with a beautiful stranger (or a stranger you believed was beautiful when you were hammered) from time to time. Be aware that alcohol is a depressant.

Alcohol used in excess has a negative impact on our bodies, our minds, and our emotions. It's easy to shake off a hangover now and then (easier for some than others). No matter how fit you are, if you are getting soused every night your mind and emotional state are going to suffer. You will miss those glorious early morning walks when people all over the world are getting ready for work and starting their day and you are putting yourself in a position where you won't be able to clearly see the specific points that make foreign cultures beautiful.

Booze is one of the most expensive impermanent luxury items you can buy. Drinking will sap your budget and sap your spirits. An average night of drinking in Turkey will cost you anywhere from 30 to 100 lira. For 20 lira you can take a boat tour in Koycegeze including lunch, natural mud baths, a trip to the beach, a beer with the locals, and an ice

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND
cream with a pretty Turkish girl (or boy).

One night drinking or the boat trip?

Don't leave the resort or tourist areas.

Being in a foreign culture can be difficult, but if you only eat in McDonalds, use the hotel facilities, stay in the backpacker ghetto area, or stick to the guidebook - you are missing what life is all about in whatever place you are in. Would you rather sit by a pool meeting other vacationers or perhaps meet Chinese villagers celebrating a local holiday?

I ran a hostel in Waikiki. Some guests never left Waikiki and they wrote comments in the guest book like "Hawaii is like Miami but more expensive". Those who ventured into towns like Kailua, Haleiwa, or Laie and who went to local spots wrote things like "Aloha is real! I love Hawaii!"

Which comment would you rather leave?

Compare everything negatively with somewhere else.

I've heard visitors to Fez, Morocco say "The clubs here aren't as good as the ones in Barcelona" or "The cafes here aren't as good as the one's in Paris". They're right, but by comparing components in a negative way, they are missing the good and interesting about the clubs and cafes in Fez. I prefer to say "The cafe's in Fez are different from those in Paris because they are filled with men. That's interesting, I wonder why?" and then to ask someone about it. I may not like it as much, but I explore the diversity instead of carping about it.

Don't Read

I've said it before, and I'll say it again. People who don't read are living fractional lives. Reading is an essential part of travel. If you are one of those people who 'doesn't like to read' than you are one of those people who should stay home and not travel. Chances are, you are also one of those people not reading this book and getting this incredible advice. I know I'm preaching to the choir here.

Don't read anything about the country or place you are going to. That way you won't understand the culture, the traditions, the history, the climate, or anything else. You can have a completely one dimensional experience. If you should read about how it's rude to point the bottoms of your feet at someone in Thailand, you'll miss out on the ass kicking that results when the kick-boxer tells you to stop pointing your feet at him and you continue to do it. You wouldn't want to miss that.

VAGO DAMITIO

If you read, you might come under a strange compulsion to go fifteen kilometers out of your way on the way between Seattle, Washington and Vancouver, British Columbia and visit the remote and gorgeous Scenic Hot Springs. Wouldn't that suck?

Don't read on your trip. Don't discover that Mark Twain stayed in the same hotel you are visiting in Honolulu (The Moana Surfrider) or that the lovely looking picnic spot in Cebu, Philippines is where Lapu Lapu ate Magellan. Who needs to know details like that?

Don't read when you're stuck at the airport. It's much better to sit and get angry at the workers or eat overpriced food. Don't read at the beach because it's much better to sit there wondering what to do when you are done swimming.

If you don't want to enjoy world travel, it is essential you not read.

Don't talk to anyone unless you have to

If you want to have horrible and meaningless travels, don't talk to anyone unless you have to. Don't talk to the man next to you on the airplane or bus, he might be a Chinese businessman who would invite you to visit his home and stay with his family.

Don't talk to the guy who works at the hotel unless you need towels or directions. If he thinks "Hey, this is a nice person" he might tell you someplace he doesn't recommend to every other rude tourist. You might end up going to a tiny temple in Penang, Malaysia instead of going to the one that has eighteen tourist buses outside it.

Don't talk to people in the street. They might try to sell you something. They might want to practice English with you. They might want to share their culture or learn something about yours. Wow, wouldn't it be a bummer if that Indonesian guy learned the USA is not like *The Jersey Shore*? Don't talk to him. Imagine if he saw your guitar and ended up teaching you a local favorite song.

If you want to NOT enjoy your travels, do not talk unless you need something.

Don't learn any of the local language.

If you want to be absolutely certain you don't enjoy your world travel, pretend you are a British Colonist and refuse to speak the local language. Don't say *tarima kasih* in Indonesia, don't ask where to get the *gonggongchecha* in China, don't say *yvet* in Turkey, don't show the grocer in Barcelona you can understand the *uno, dos, tres*, don't speak French in Paris (I found Parisians to be gracious about my bad French), don't say *shukran* in Morocco, *kapcun kap* in Thailand, *daijobu* in Japan,

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND
bollocks in England, dude in California, *wienerschnitzel* in Germany, or
mahalo in Hawaii.

Speaking the language encourages people to learn about you, to teach you about their culture, to make friends with you, to have relationships, to fall in love. There is nothing miserable about any of that. If you want to Not enjoy the world of smooth living...don't speak the local language.



VAGO DAMITIO

APPENDIX I: NOTES FROM THE ROAD TO SMOOTH LIVING

~one~

They say the road to hell is paved with good intentions. It's true. Whether those intentions are to make a life, rescue someone, or do the right thing – the end result is the same – somebody suffers along the way. I don't think there is a way to escape that.

As someone who has always struggled (and often failed) to be a good person, I've found the road to be a rough. Sometimes it became incredibly painful and sometimes, yes, it has been hell. My friends, that is the bad news. We're on the way to hell.

Luckily, as someone who has traveled, I know a road always leads somewhere, but that doesn't mean it is where you have to stop. There are multiple roads and escape is always possible whether by conventional or unconventional means. Maybe I've had to jump a fence and borrow a canoe to paddle across forbidden waters, but the thing is, there is always a way out.

I used to think I was a brainy guy. Now, I know I'm another dummy on the road of life. My delusions of being the smartest man in the room have been painfully put to rest again and again. Don't worry, I still have plenty of other delusions, but I'm trying to break them away. Another illusion that has been ripped from me is the illusion I'm a nice guy. I'm not.

I don't know exactly why I've done so many things that go against feeling good about myself, but the fact is I've done a lot. I'm not the worst guy in the world, but I'm not in the top 50% of nice guys. I've ACTED like a nice guy more than I've been a nice guy. That's why so many people might tell you I'm a nice guy. Chances are though, if you probed, you would hear the ever-present 'but' which while not necessarily negating everything that came before it, does a good job of changing the

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

intensity of the original thought. That's another illusion I've escaped, thinking my secrets are secret at all.

Yes. Life is about suffering. Life is about learning from our suffering. We are given the most potent tools for suffering the Creator could devise. Envy, Greed, Lust, Domination, Corruption, Laziness, Abundance, and Shortage. These are what drive mankind. Desire, desire, desire. WE WANT and then WE SUFFER. For me there have been so many unrealistic situations I've wanted and suffered from not having – from concepts like love to perfect sex with a perfect woman.

I'm not sure what we get out of WANTING except suffering and then disappointment. If we want something bad enough, it never quite lives up to the expectation. Like a thirsty man who finds water, satisfies his thirst, and then thinks to himself "That wasn't quite as good as I imagined."

Over and over and over again. Not for one person but for the many generations of people before and after us. I don't want to sound like I'm creating or discovering this philosophy, the Buddha pointed it out more than 5000 years ago. Others have pointed it out too. It's not a SECRET.

We go on making asses of ourselves and each other because we want something we don't have. The most successful become billionaires and pimps. By the way, successful is not a synonym for NICE. Quite the opposite. The great socialist Eugene V. Debs said it best "Behind every great fortune lies a great crime." I would further that by saying behind every great people lies a genocide, or two, or hundreds. Successful and nice are light opposites. Great and TERRIBLE are equally opposed.

There are always exceptions to every rule. Maybe I'm still enshrouded by the illusion that there is such a thing as a great person. I want to believe it still and so, I suffer. In fact, I see why. When an ordinary person believes in a great person, the ordinary becomes less. Knowing that is suffering for those like me. If I am less, I ask myself, why?

This is an illusion. One can't help wonder if this is the pathology that afflicts mankind. Each of us driven by the unique desires we want. Unable to communicate our desires but driven by them none the less and perhaps not being aware of what it is we want.

When I was young, I believed the thing I wanted most was sex. Sure, sex is great, the boom-boom is fun and feels good, but I was after something else. I wanted to be as admired as those guys who were always getting loads of sex when I was growing up. How could I be dripping with cool like them? Get pussy. Get fucking. Have a laundry list of chicks.

But you know what? When I lost my virginity it was a disappointment. After that I was chasing pussy like a crazy man,

VAGO DAMITIO

but once I reached it, I was disappointed again and again. There wasn't some magic switch going off that turned me to a modern day Fonzie. Same deal with clothes, cars, other 'expensive possessions'. Though I will say in my short term goal of getting pussy, having a Porsche helped a lot. A sexy car makes you sexier than nearly anything else in the material world. At least in my experience.

I was disappointed because, like I said, scoring tail wasn't what I wanted. I wanted to be admired. At some point, I became cool (yeah, I'm cool) but I still wanted something – I can't describe what it is, but I know I still want it and I know as long as I want it, I will continue to suffer. Once I decide to stop wanting it, I will stop suffering, and then I might get it after all. At that point you can enjoy material possessions. Funny.

Back to my opening statement. We're on the way to hell, but the road leads through it and hopefully we can find a touch of BLISS and RELAXATION on the other side of Hell Town.

~two~

Smooth Living. I imagined the smooth life was one thing for all people, but that's not the case. What is smooth for one is empty for another. None of us want the same situations or possessions. We might think we do, but in fact, most people don't know what the good life for them would be like. In other words, we aren't always conscious of what it is we want. A great example is the relationship between Hanane and I. We want totally different outcomes from life, but somehow we manage to get along and not kill each other. At least she hasn't killed me yet.

I'm not implying I know exactly what it is I want. I don't know what I want. That makes it hard to stop wanting it, right? Welcome to the rough spots on the road. I don't recommend the course I've taken in life as I've tried to figure out what it is that makes me happy.

I took the view early on that in order to know I didn't want something, I should experience it first. That included a lot of awful decisions I could have easily skipped if I had paid attention to the wise words of prophets, philosophers, and mystics. I didn't do that though. I decided to take the path of least resistance. I didn't resist the temptations put in front of me. What is a temptation? Easy. Something you think you want but that you know won't be good for you. I've given in to the temptations of the world wherever I could find them. I've traveled the world and sought out new and exotic temptations. I've allowed my emotions to control me, a

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

temptation that has led to broken hearts, broken noses, and jail. By the way, my nose hasn't been broken...yet. My heart, yeah- tiny itsy wee bits and pieces.

What have I learned from this debauchery, violence, and (I admit it) sometimes great fun? I've learned a lot of lessons I don't like and one or two lessons that have improved my life. The funny thing is, I only learned the good when the bad had pushed me towards the risk of insanity or suicide. Another funny thing is if I had looked for answers, I could have avoided the pain and moved into the joyful simply by reading past the surface of the world's holy books. I was reading them, but I was also misreading them.

The reason why is because I was trying so hard to fulfill that desire to be one of the respected hoodlums guys in the old neighborhood. Guns, jail, and tail were the marks of the cool ones. I went after and embraced all three in my life. None of them turned that switch in my head that said "Now I'm a completed guy". There might have been some people who truly believed I was over the top awesome, but I didn't, because I wasn't. You can fool yourself on the surface like you can fool other people, but underneath you know the truth. The truth hurts and it drives you to find something to soothe it.

Marketers, advertising agencies, travel bloggers, and brands have figured this out. Most of us sense we need something and we are desperately looking for what it is. Maybe a watch, maybe cologne (which will bring chicks and money), maybe an affair, maybe adult diapers. If you watch a few commercials you will touch the emptiness which comes from the ads. It creates a pull towards something. Temptation, desire, suffering. The big tri-fecta of human imperfection. I don't want to believe they are doing it on purpose, but I'm also certain that is a result of my DESIRE to live in a world that isn't completely EVIL.

How do we get to the mythical HAPPY PLACE if we don't know what it is? I'm not there, so I can't give you directions. Besides, my paradise might be hell to you. Paradise exists inside your soul and the map you need to get there is a one of a kind.

~three~

When it comes down to it, nothing I can teach you is going to bring you to your own version of Smooth Living. I'm not sure if anyone can ever get there - but, and here's the catch. I'm not sure you need to.

Like travel, people get fixated on the destination without realizing it's

VAGO DAMITIO

the journey that matters. Do you need a destination? You do. The destination is the key to your success.

If you reach your destination, you've set your sights too low. Pick a destination that seems impossible and stop measuring success by whether you are there or not. Instead, count every step towards that goal as an individual success. Every microvictory counts.

The key to smooth living and success isn't reaching the destination. The key is knowing that so long as you are moving towards it, you are succeeding. Make sure you take the time to celebrate and enjoy success along the way. Don't miss the journey for the destination, because the truth is that you might find that the road gave you more than the end point.

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND HELPFUL TRAVEL WEBSITES AND ONLINE RESOURCES

There are millions of travel sites out there. New ones pop up every day and many old favorites disappear as the web becomes more and more saturated with travel blogs, social travel networks, travel magazines, article sites, and booking engines.

The first sites I recommend you visit are mine.

<http://www.vagabond.com>

<http://www.vagodamitio.com>

<http://www.chrisdamitio.com>

<http://www.microvictoryarmy.com>

Social travel sites are all about the social aspects of the web. They are also places where normal people share their activities, houses, or yards.

<http://www.wheretosleep.co.uk>

<http://www.couchsurfing.org>

<http://www.airbnb.com>

<http://www.swapmycitypad.com>

<http://www.crashpadder.com>

<http://www.campinmygarden.com>

<http://www.vayable.com>

<http://www.theamazings.com>

<http://www.skyara.com>

<http://www.roomorama.com>

<http://www.cabcorner.com>

<http://www.lonelyplanet.com>

<http://www.tripadvisor.com>

<http://www.bootsnall.com>

<http://www.tripitini.com>

<http://www.licketytrip.com>

<http://www.digihibit.com>

<http://www.unusualhotelsoftheworld.com>

<http://www.sleepinginairports.net>

<http://www.literarytravel.com>

<http://www.onebag.com>

<http://www.virtourist.com>

VAGO DAMITIO

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vago Damitio is the Commander in Chief of the Micro Victory Army. He is a free vagabond radical having fun and pissing on the accepted and the expected. Vago is a writer, husband, father, traveler and a geeky entrepreneur. He loves food, travel, books, technology, and gardening. Ultimately, his goal is to have all those labels fall together into the perfect lifestyle with each one complementing the other.

Vago was born near Seattle, Washington and his home towns are Bellingham, Washington and Honolulu, Hawaii. Currently he is trapped in Morocco and waiting for a chance to escape. In the meantime, he is working on a secret plan to rule the world.

He's available to answer any questions you might have unless he has either died, disappeared or been abducted by aliens in which case, you are on your own.

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You can find Vago's online travel magazine at www.vagobond.com

You can find Vago's personal website at www.vagodamitio.com

Join the Micro Victory Army at www.microvictoryarmy.com

You can find his old articles at www.chrisdamitio.com

Early Years

Vago Damitio was born on a crunchy snow white morning in Tacoma, Washington to a waitress and a musician on December 27, 1971.

He is the fifth generation of Damitio's born in the Puget Sound Region and descended from the Walkers, Boones, and Mcleods on his mother's side. There is some talk of royals and Cherokees in his family but one thing is certain, he was born of a family of pioneers. His ancestors were some of the first Americans in the Pacific Northwest, the first Europeans in the Americas, and the first oil men in the Gulf States. Both of his

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

grandfathers worked in the Middle East during the 30's, 40's, and 50's. Their far ranging tales and his grandmother's collection of National Geographic Magazines led him to a thirst for travel and adventures.

His given name was Christopher and he was variously known as Chris, Christ (rhymes with Twist), and finally Vago. His childhood was spent exploring old ghost towns of the West, hiking in the mountains, and camping in the great National Parks of America. Significant time was spent digging underground forts and building treehouses in the mountains and forests of California and Oregon. An early love of books led to all of these forts being well stocked with books about travel and adventures.

From about the age of ten, Vago set about discovering how to survive in the wilds and create everything he needed. From solar stills to trapping, tanning skins to building bows and arrows from raw materials, to knapping stone tools surviving in the wilds with minimal tools or equipment. He would set out on solo camping trips in which he tested himself in the wilds from about the age of twelve onward. He became an expert with firearms and upon graduating high school opted to join the US Marines because it seemed like the most challenging thing he could put before himself.

Sergeant of Marines

His decision to join the Marines was also based on a sense of patriotism since the US was about to engage in the first significant war since Vietnam. Stories of the mighty Iraqi army and how difficult it would be to defeat the terrible Republican Guard laid his duty before him clearly. The war was over before he'd completed the three months of boot camp in San Diego. Over the next four years, he served honorably, became an expert with rifle, pistol, and knife, and achieved the rank of Sergeant before completing his obligation and earning an Honorable Discharge. He was never required to kill anyone in the service of his country, which was a huge blessing.

Radical and Dropout

In 1995 he returned to the Pacific Northwest where he worked in radio, film, and print journalism while achieving a minor degree in journalism. His explorations of Alaska, the UK, the USA, and Canada brought him into contact with new ideas and new people and in 1996 he decided that firearms were too dangerous to be in the hands of individuals and responsibly sold all of his guns. In hindsight, he wishes he would have simply melted them down so there would be that many fewer guns in the

VAGO DAMITIO

world. From 1998 to 2000 he published and edited Conchsense, a magazine dedicated to finding the meeting point between creativity and community.

By the end of 1999, Conchsense had become too radical for it's advertising base after a year spent organizing for the World Trade Organization Protests in November of 1999. The protests were a success in that they shut down the WTO meeting in Seattle, but a failure in that they didn't change the general idea and caused the global governing body to rethink how it would deal with protest and dissent. In 2000, Vago laid Conchsense to rest and joined a Silicon Valley dotcom startup called TechPlanet as a partner in Seattle.

Techplanet was typical of greedy venture capital startups and operated more on hype than substance. Seeing the writing on the wall, Damitio retired from corporate life with no money or stock options. His final act at TechPlanet was to send out an email to all the employees that they should leave before the company told them it wouldn't be able to pay them. Two months later, the company sent a notice asking employees to work without pay while they secured financing. Two weeks after that, the headquarters in Silicon Valley closed without notifying the other 52 offices around the US and that was the end of that. No one got any stock options.

Vago's next gig (late 2000) was working as a community organizer for ACORN (the Association of Communities Organizing for Reform Now) where he helped organize tenants to fight for better conditions from slumlords and worked on bringing about awareness of predatory lending. When he suggested to his union members that they go throw bricks through the Countrywide Mortgage windows, his superiors decided it was time for him to move on. Too radical for ACORN.

At this point, Vago decided to lead by example. He would move out of his house, live in his VW van (which he'd bought for \$100), and demonstrate how those who would soon be evicted from their homes could not only survive, but thrive. Over the next twenty weeks he lived the life of a road warrior while discovering how to live in America with no home, no job, no money, and plenty of ingenuity.

The universe told him to quit in 2001 when he won more than \$2000 on a slot machine at an Indian casino. With that money he bought a ticket to China, secured a visa and left everything he'd known behind for the next four months while he climbed sacred peaks in China, met with the hill tribes in Laos, explored deserted islands in Thailand, and finally took a job teaching English in the tiny town of Parapat in Sumatra, Indonesia.

He left Parapat when the parents of his students told him that it was

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND

no longer safe to stay. Muslim vs. Christian violence was becoming terrible in Aceh, Medan, and other regions. While he would have loved to stay, it seemed wise to leave when the locals said it was no longer safe.

Returning to the USA was a shock after living among people who were quite happy with very little. The USA by contrast seemed to be a country where people were unhappy no matter how much they supersized their lives. After the tragic events of September 11, 2001 – Vago was a vocal opponent of revenge killing and making war to feel better but watched as flag waving American zealots ripped up his signs which read “Drop bread, not bombs. Enough have died already.”

Seeing that flag waving had replaced intelligent thought, Vago wanted to get away from the USA again. By selling everything he owned he was able to buy a one way ticket to Hawaii. He arrived with \$100 was relieved to see that in Hawaii at least, people weren’t screaming for blood. From then until 2008, Vago lived in Hawaii and traveled in the Pacific exploring the Hawaiian Islands, French Polynesia, Guam, and the Philippines. In 2003 he published his first book *Rough Living: Tips and Tales of a Vagabond*. It was from this book that he earned the name Vago. A friendly bartender named Random at the bar where he would think, drink, and peddle his books (*Le Chat Noir* in Fairhaven, Washington) began to call him ‘the Vagabond’, then ‘Vagobond’, then ‘Vago’. (RIP Random!)

During his time in Hawaii he worked in Tourism. He worked as a kayak guide on the island of Kauai, a rain forest hiking guide on the island of Oahu, and developed luxury tours on the islands of Oahu, Kauai, and Maui for a high end limousine company. By the end of 2008, he had also earned a degree in Cultural Anthropology from the University of Hawaii at Manoa. During his time at UHM, Vago was the President of the Honor Student Society, Managing Editor of the student newspaper *Ka Leo*, and president of the UH chapter of the Sierra Club.

He graduated with highest honors (just like the crazy he met on the road between Bellingham and Seattle!) in the top .1% of his class. Along the way, he worked towards a minor in film making at UH’s Academy of Creative Media. His anthropological focus was on the anthropology of tourism, and the anthropology of the internet with his thesis looking at the formation of real world friendships through online interaction. It specifically used the fan boards for the TV show *LOST* which was filmed entirely in Hawaii. His ground breaking work was presented at the annual gathering of the American Anthropological Association.

VAGO DAMITIO

Leaving Hawaii and Finding the World

At the end of 2008 he left Hawaii to see if he could find his place in the world. At this time, he changed the focus of his blog from writing and cultural oddities to travel. Vagobond.com was born. He met his future wife in Morocco in February of 2009. In April of 2010 they were married. In August of 2011 they welcomed their daughter Sophia into the world. During the four years since he's left Hawaii, he's been to more than 40 countries but still not found anywhere quite as wonderful as the land of Aloha.

Currently, Vago and his family live in Sefrou, Morocco where they are waiting to hear back from the US Visa and Immigration Service so that they can all return to the USA and perhaps eventually to Hawaii.

He blogs at www.vagodamitio.com and is the Editor in Chief of www.vagobond.com where you can find more photos, stories, and information like this book is filled with.

Books by Vago Damitio (www.vagodamitio.com)

Rough Living: Tips and Tales of a Vagabond (2003)

Rough Living: Tips and Tales of a Vagabond Master Edition (2013)

Slackville Road (2004)

The Princess and the Vagabond (2005)

The Hu Factor (2006)

Lost in Transmediality: Exploring LOST and Its Fans (2008)

Liminal Travel (2009)

Spiritual Fasting: Faith, Love, and Jihad (2010)

Finding your Passion Income: Becoming Free (2010)

Douchebags, Fags, and Hags (2011)

Meliptimous Taggle and Other Stories (2012)

SMOOTH LIVING: BEYOND THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND
Not My Morocco (2012)

Smooth Living: Beyond the Life of a Vagabond (2013)

The Keys to the Riad (2013)

Dear Reader,

Right now is the perfect time to go to Amazon.com or GoodReads.com (or your own website) and Write a Review of this book. In fact, if you write one and send me the link, I'll send you an e-copy of both *Meliptimous Taggle* as a way of saying thanks. ~Vago

**Send me the link to your review at
vago@vagodamitio.com**

Mahalo!